

Organic ambition: one field in four

The EU wants more land in organic farming and has set out a big target

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The EU Commission has set a target of 25% of farm land area to be under organic management by 2030. The target comes within the new Farm to Fork Strategy Plan. The Commission says that it wants to focus on the sustainable economic development of the organic sector and on promoting more demand for organic food.

Currently, the average organic land area in the EU is just 7.5%. Organic land area in Ireland remains proportionally small at just over 2%, but there has been a 50% increase since 2014.

Why organic?

There are several reasons why organic farming is supported:

- **The law:** The organic farming system is enshrined in the 'Farm to fork' legislation and has the trust of the consumer. All EU operators farm to a strict set of EU standards and are inspected regularly.
- **Sustainable low-input farming:** Research indicates that, in general, organic farming has a more benign effect on the environment than conventional farming.
- There is no artificial Nitrogen or artificial agro-chemicals permitted and we need to reduce levels of both, according to the EU. Organic production leads to increased biodiversity due to plant species diversity, crop rotations and low nitrogen use.
- **Animal Welfare Considerations:** Animal welfare and health has be-

come more relevant in farming and it is considered of paramount importance in organic farming.

- On organic farms, animals are given more space if housed and are allowed to express their normal range of behaviours.

- **Increasing demand for organic food:** The global demand for organic food is worth €100bn and this is forecast to rise. The EU market has doubled over the last 10 years and is now almost €40bn.

- According to Bord Bia, Irish organic retail sales add up to €250m, which is about 1% of total food sales. The EU wants to invest in growing the demand for organic food further.

- **Farmer lifestyle choice:** Young farmers especially are looking at their farms with new eyes, free from the perspective that their parents may have had. Some see it as a way of cutting back on inputs and labour, while still generating a good income.

- **Increasing rural viability:** Organic can be a profitable option, with the potential to boost investment in the local economy and create jobs. This can be the case for all types of organic enterprises, but in particular for small horticulture enterprises, many of which employ local rural people

Organic Farming in Ireland

Number of organic farmers: 1,823 (July 2020) including the top six counties: Cork (227), Roscommon (183),

Galway (128), Tipperary (119), Limerick (114) and Leitrim (111).

Enterprises (approximate latest figures up to 2019)

- **Cattle:** ~1,400 farmers, ~18,500 suckler cows.
- **Sheep:** ~600 farmers, ~65,000 ewes.
- **Tillage:** ~160 farmers farming ~2,500ha (mainly oats).
- **Horticulture:** ~300 farmers produce vegetables on ~520 ha.
- **Dairy:** 62 farmers milking 5,000 cows.

Source: DAFM

What are the market opportunities?

Strong demand exists for the majority of organic products, in particular tillage, horticulture and dairy products, much of which are currently imported.

Large companies including Glenisk (organic milk), Flahavans (organic porridge oats), Good Herdsmen, Slaney Meats (organic beef) and ICM (organic lamb) are involved in the organic business and buy product from farmers.

It is important that prospective organic farmers make contact with processors to ensure that a buyer is in place. Contracts may also be available from some processors.

Many organic producers like to sell directly at farmers markets, box schemes and farm shops. Local research is required when considering these options.

Farmer Profile: Darren and Gerard Grennan, Clara, Co Offaly - Organic Dairying

Darren and his father Gerard farm 110ha near Clara, Co Offaly. They have been farming organically since 2010 and supply organic milk to a local organic processor (Glenisk) for yogurt and milk production.

According to Darren, the conversion to organic was largely a financial decision.

"Prior to going organic in early 2010, we milked 60 spring-calving cows, but the volatility in the milk price and the price of inputs, including conventional fertiliser, made us consider other options.

"In order to support two families, the options available were to either milk 100-120 cows as organic or milk 200 cows as conventional. After visiting other organic farms and exploring the market opportunities, we made up our mind to go organic." The Grennans now milk 140 cows and produce milk all year around.

The main changes to the farm involved getting up to speed with organic methods of farming and coping without artificial fertilisers.

Darren says: "There were no local organic dairy producers in the locality, so it was a challenge to get information at the time. We visited



Gerard and Darren Grennan.

other mainly organic beef and cereal operators and got ideas from them. We also attended a local organic farming course. In organics, you are learning all the time."

The Grennans knew that going without artificial fertiliser would be a challenge, but they have coped by using good nutrient management planning and reseeded regularly with high-clover content swards.

"I use mainly slurry and farmyard manure, and on occasion potassium sulphate when soil potassium levels

get low. I find that by spreading the slurry watery and often, that I get best use out of it," says Darren.

On average, Darren aims to reseed around 15-20ha of the farm every second year.

"All my fields are full of clover at the moment," he says. While some farmers worry about bloat, Darren has found no such problems: "I have never had a case of bloat because the cows have become so accustomed to the clover."

Farmer Profile: Fergal Byrne, Calverstown Little, Dunlavin, Co Kildare - Organic, beef, cereal and sheep

For a number of years, Fergal had an interest in organic farming: "In 2014, I felt I had to start looking at other options for the farm." At the time, he was taking a lot of conacre and growing cereals on it. "Every time I went into the field I was spending money on fertilisers and sprays."

In late 2014, Fergal completed a 25 hour Introduction to Organic Farming course. A farm plan was drawn up and the farm entered conversion to organic in 2015.

"Firstly, I gave up the conacre and concentrated on farming the home farm." Oats are now grown on contract for Flahavans. A comcrop is also grown – a mixture of barley, oats and a combinable pea has been sown this year. This will be used on-farm for winter feeding.

Last year, Fergal established a sward of red clover: "The reason that I sowed the red clover was because of its protein, winter feed value and its ability to 'fix' nitrogen from the air."



Philip and Fergal Byrne.

Prior to going organic, weanlings were sold in the autumn.

"For the last two years, all the cattle have been finished and sold in two batches in late January and March." They are sold to Good Herdsmen at two years old.

Ewes are lambed in two batches, starting in mid-February, with the second batch in mid-March. The first of the finished lambs are sold from the first week of June and through the summer.

"I have two organic markets for my finished lambs. We supply lambs to Irish Country Meats and to Coolanowle Organic Meats."

Since last year, the wool from shearing the sheep has been sold to a specialist organic wool miller, Yarns and Vibes, to be made into knitting wool.

"Farming organically, I believe that I am producing superior produce in a farming system that is good for biodiversity and the environment around us, with no great reduction to the farm output."

Farm Profile: Coolanowle Organic Farm



Coolanowle Farm was converted to organic production in 2001 by Jimmy Mulhall. Jimmy's vision was to create his own market, rather than depend on volatile commodity markets which leave little profit for the farmer. He also aspired to farm in a more sustainable and environmentally-friendly way.

Jimmy began to sell his own organic beef and sheepmeat directly at farmers markets locally in Carlow, Kilkenny and Dublin. Over time, as this business expanded into increasing online and market sales, Jimmy, along with his son Eddie, have been growing the Organic Meat business and Jimmys' son-in-law, Bill George has taken over the running of the farm.

Bill is leasing the land from Jimmy and is now farming 145ha. The main enterprise on the farm is dairying,

with 140 cows being milked. The beef stock are sold to Eddie (who is farming 65ha) and he brings them to slaughter for the business. Eddie also provides lambs to the meat business, along with organic chickens coming from another family member, Pat Mulhall.

The milk is supplied to The Village Dairy, Killeslin, Co Laois, and to the Little Milk Company. The feed bill is the biggest challenge on organic dairy farms, therefore Bill George grows as much of his winter feed as possible. This includes harvesting red clover silage – up to four cuts/year and also sowing a combi-crop of barley and peas, which is combine-harvested.

The high protein content in the red clover silage and the combi-crop helps reduce the need to buy in high protein organic feed. Straight barley

and wheat are also bought from other local organic farmers for winter feeding.

The latest business venture for the family has been the opening of Coolanowle Foodhall in Carlow. This comprises an organic butchery, a deli and a restaurant, while also stocking a wide selection of local artisan produce and home baking.

Anyone interested in attending a 25 hour QQI Level 5 'Organic Farming Principles' course can register on a waiting list and when courses are organised, they will be contacted. Here is a link to the organic section of the Teagasc public website with details and email address: <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/organics/training/>.

For more information, go to www.teagasc.ie/organics.