

Sector boosted by new recruits

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THE ORGANIC sector is set to receive a large boost of new recruits this year. With the May 29 deadline for the new organic scheme looming, approximately 200 new applicants have applied to join the scheme.

Already, 2015 looks set to record by far the biggest increase in organic farmer numbers in recent years.

Most of these are cattle and sheep farmers (mainly suckler farmers), with cereals also proving to be a popular option.

Strong areas of interest include the west and midlands, with strong clusters of interest in Roscommon and Cavan.

With participation levels in organics historically low in Ireland (just over 1pc of agricultural utilisable area in Ireland is organic versus 5pc in Europe) the new scheme will undoubtedly help boost supply of organic food in the sector and help close the gap with Europe.

With the new scheme offering a basic payment rate of €170/ha (up 60pc from the previous scheme) up to 60ha, organics is becoming a common sense option for many farmers who want to boost their incomes. But every farmer has a different reason for going organic.

The attractive scheme payment rates, replacing old REPS payments, the rising cost of inputs and stagnant levels of profitability especially in the drystock sector often crop up.

Interest in the environment and interest

in supplying organic markets and direct sales are also factors. Organic farmers tend to be younger with many taking over farms and starting on a clean slate.

They often tend to be more open-minded and are free from the aloofness and prejudices that some farmers and others in the agricultural industry still have about organics.

Concerns

There are some concerns for the future. With the number and scale of farmers now entering the sector set to increase

significantly this will require a renewed mobilisation of organic processors to seek out new markets.

While market premium prices are available for organic produce, the sector is considered niche and fragile in many sectors.

For example, the market for organic lamb is severely underdeveloped at present.

With the expected increased scale of producers and improved continuity of supply, more confidence may come from processors to seek out and sell what is considered

a quality product from a country with a strong reputation for good food.

There are some positive signs. The organic market in Ireland has recently returned to growth with sales now up for two years in a row to €104m (source Bord Bia, May 2015).

There is also a large European market at our doorstep worth over €20bn which has recorded very strong growth over the last decade.

Dan Clavin works on Teagasc's Rural Economy and Development Programme and is based in Athenry, Co Galway.

CASE STUDY: Lynch's 'Hell's Kettle' Organic Farm, Donard, Co Wicklow

'We wanted to have complete control over what we were producing'

Gavin Lynch talks about switching from conventional dairying to an organic suckler-to-finish system

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GAVIN Lynch, his wife Linda and their son Peter live on their family farm near the village of Donard, Co Wicklow. Along with his father Pat, they run a 44ha farm which is currently being converted from an organic suckler herd to a 35-cow organic dairy/calf-to-beef finishing herd

The Lynch family have traditionally been dairy farmers and were involved in conventional dairying up until 2005 when the poor milk price and falling returns meant that dairying was no longer a viable option on their upland farm.

They sold off the dairy herd and bought a herd of suckler cows from which spring calved weanlings were sold in the autumn. In 2009, Gavin gave up his off-farm work with the aim of trying to make a viable income from the farm alone.

"I had been interested in organic farming for a while as we had a good few

neighbours involved in organics," says Gavin.

Having talked through the option of converting to organics with his father, Gavin began the conversion process in early 2010.

He started work on altering houses, attended the Teagasc Organic Course and applied for Organic Certification.

He decided to change to a suckler-to-finish system in order to take advantage of the organic premium price for beef. Three years ago, the Lynchs also installed butchering facilities in order to sell beef directly from the farm.

"The on-farm processing of our beef has required a significant investment in facilities but we wanted to have complete control over what we are producing" according to Gavin.

"The changes to the animal housing were fairly straight forward really," says Gavin. "We had a cubicle system in our main cattle shed with a slatted feeding area. The slatted area is fine as long as it doesn't comprise more than



Gavin Lynch with his wife Linda and son Peter on the family's organic farm in Donard, Co Wicklow

50pc of the shed area. We removed and sold the cubicles which paid for the load of hardcore and readymix to fill in the channel. That was really it."

The other big change that occurs when converting organics is the replacement of artificial fertilisers with natural organic manures and permitted natural mineral fertilisers.

"My fertiliser bill which amounted to around €4,500 vanished and we created our own fertiliser through composting farmyard manure," he explained.

"The fertiliser bill was replaced by a bill for bedding straw which is around €3,000/year. When you

“The extra demands of the organic standards have actually improved my herd's health

see the effect that natural manures have on the land you just want to create more and more of it so I have no problem with buying straw to bed cattle and feed my land," he said.

"As we were not too heavily stocked at the time of conversion, spreading no artificial fertilizer didn't have too much of an impact on the farm or stock numbers. We managed to maintain our herd, stocked at around 1.2lu/ha and still produced a surplus of fodder to act as a buffer in case of getting a bad winter, which came in 2012-13."

Through re-seeding with white and red clover, Gavin has been slowly increasing the stocking rate on their farm over the past three years and is currently stocked at 1.5lu/ha. Average yields of silage from red clover silage amount to around 20 bales/ac/yr over three cuts.

Lower costs

Another cost which significantly decreased since organic conversion was Gavin's veterinary bill. He

attributes this to improved housing standards for cattle and a move from a set-stocking regime to a paddock grazing system which utilises grass better and helps clover to grow better.

"I think that the extra management required by organic standards and that extra attention to detail that is required has actually improved my herd health and decreased my veterinary bill," explained Gavin.

He will continue to sell beef directly from the farm from progeny off his organic dairy herd and intends to supply organic milk to a processor.

While suckler farming, Gavin managed to supply all his cattle directly into the organic beef market either through direct sales from his own farm or to Slaney Meats who are one of three organic beef processors which slaughter organic cattle in Ireland.

"Financially the move to organic beef production made perfect sense for me," he says. This is mainly due to the higher price I

have received for my cattle, the lower costs and the good quality feed from my white and red clover swards. The scheme payments are also a good help.

"Now I can see an opportunity to supply organic milk and we believe we have the skill base to give it a good shot from our years of experience milking cows in the past and the knowledge we now have in organic farming methods."

Overall Gavin is optimistic about the growth of organics in Ireland but he believes that a lot of work needs to be done to help grow the sector.

"I believe that Europe especially is a great place for us to market ourselves as a great place to produce organic food. In France they have had double digit growth in the organic market in recent years. There are certainly opportunities to exploit this. I'd say the future looks bright for organics."

Visit www.teagasc.ie/organics for a step-by-step guide to organic conversion.