

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 23rd October 2020

Organic ambition: One field in four

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

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 N or agro chemical 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. 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 become 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:**

Organics 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

1. 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).

2. Enterprises (approximate enterprise 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.

