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Irish Farming – its Green Credentials

Irish agriculture is one of the most sustainable in the world. Despite media commentary suggesting otherwise, Irish farmers produce food of the highest quality with a low environmental footprint.

Farming and the wider agri-food sector are the backbone of economic activity in rural Ireland. It is Ireland's largest indigenous sector, providing employment to over 300,000 people directly and indirectly. Despite wider economic challenges, exports from the agri-food sector were €14.5 billion in 2019.[1]

Economic activity derived from farming has a substantial positive spin-off impact on the economy, in particular in rural areas. Recent research completed by UCC outlined that a €1 million increase in beef sector output generates a further €2.11 million in the wider economy and supports an additional 16 jobs.[2]

1 Bord Bia (2020). Export Performance & Prospects 2019–2020.Retrived from: https://www.bordbia.ie/globalassets/bordbia.ie/industry/performance-and-prospects/2019-pdf/performance-and-prospects-2019-2020.pdf.

2 Hennessy (2018) The Economic and Societal Importance of the Irish Suckler Beef Sector. Retrieved from: https://www.ifa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2018-The-Economic-and-Societal-Importance-of-the-Irish-Suckler-Beef-Sector-Aug-2018.pdf.

Irish Farming's Green Track Record

Irish farmers understand that they have a unique role to play in meeting the climate change challenge, however, this must be done in a fair and balanced way. In dealing with the climate change challenge, it is imperative that Irish farmers' current sustainability credentials are fully acknowledged. The following describes some of these credentials in more detail:

- Irish dairy and beef output is extremely efficient from a carbon footprint perspective. Irish milk has the lowest carbon footprint in the EU while Irish beef has the fifth lowest.[3] Despite what many would lead us to believe, the carbon-efficient expansion of milk production in Ireland has helped displace approx. 4 million tonnes of carbon which would have been emitted had the equivalent dairy product been produced outside of Ireland.[4]

- Irish farming is a predominantly grass-based system. As a result, the use of direct energy (e.g. electricity) on Irish farms, at 56% of the EU average, is very low by European and international standards.[5]

- Agriculture is unique in its ability to remove carbon from the atmosphere by carbon sequestration. Grassland soils currently sequester approximately 440 tonnes CO^2/ha or an estimated 1,800 million tonnes CO^2 across all Irish mineral soils. National greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are about 60 million tonnes per year; accordingly, our mineral soils store about 30 years' worth of emissions.[6]

- Agricultural emissions as a percentage of total national emissions have remained static since 1990 at approximately 35%. In the same period, emissions from transport have more than doubled from 9% to 20%. In addition, agricultural emissions actually reduced by 3.9% in 2019 due to a reduction in fertiliser use and liming, in spite of an increase in dairy cow numbers.[7]

- It is now accepted in many quarters that methane emissions from our livestock and dairy sectors, which are biogenic in nature, merit differentiated treatment with regard to climate change. The Climate Action & Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 recognises the distinct characteristics of biogenic methane; this was a result of strong engagement by the IFA.

3 (Teagasc (2019) Agriculture and climate change Retrieved from: https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2019/TResearch_Winter2019_AgriAndClimateChange_Web.pdf

4 Teagasc (2019) Taking stock of sustainable growth. Retrieved from: https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2019/Taking-stock-of-sustainable-growth.pdf.s

5 Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2021). Draft SWOT Analysis Preparations for Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

6 Teagasc (2020). Enhancing soil carbon sequestration to contribute to carbon neutrality on Irish farms. Retrieved from:https://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2020/enhancing-soil-carbon-sequestration-to-contribute-to-carbon-neutrality-on-irish-farms.php#:~:text=Why%20is%20Carbon%20sequestration%20important%3F&text=Ireland%20must%20reduce%20greenhouse%20gas,can%20help%20balance%20GHG%20emissions

7 EPA (2021). Agriculture: Environmental Protection Agency, Ireland. Retrieved from: https://www.epa.ie/ghg/agriculture/.

- The majority of Irish farms are not intensively stocked. Over 60% of Irish livestock farms are stocked at less than the equivalent of 0.33 cows per acre.[8]

- Irish farmers, through the Origin Green programme, were the first internationally to complete annual sustainability audits. To date, over 212,000 carbon audits have been undertaken on Irish dairy and beef farms. These audits show dairy and beef farmers have reduced their carbon footprint per unit of produce by 9% and 5% respectively since 2014.[9]

- Farmers are already taking many positive steps to make their farms more sustainable:
  - Over €80 million has been invested in Low Emission Slurry Spreading (LESS) equipment.
  - Sales of protected urea have more than doubled in the past year amounting to nearly 50,000 tonnes sold in 2020.
  - 96% of farmers have positively engaged with the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) agreeing to put measures in place to help improve water quality.[10]

- While Ireland has a relatively low level of forest cover (approx. 11%), it has the third largest total hedgerow area in the EU, with an estimated 450,000 hectares or 6.4% of the land area. Since 1994, 6,605 kilometres of new hedgerows and more than 3.7 million trees have been established on non-forest land.[11] These hedgerows, which farmers continually upkeep, help to maintain biodiversity and sequester carbon.[12]

- Irish farmers recycle a huge proportion of the silage plastic they use annually. In 2020 famers recycled 79% (34,000 tonnes) of wrap and pit cover plastic while there was a 17% increase in the number of plastic fertiliser bags recycled.[13]

8 CSO (2018). Farm Structure Survey 2016.Retrieved from: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-fss/farmstructuresurvey2016/.

9 Bord Bia (2019). Origin Green Progress Report Update. Retrieved from: https://www.origingreen.ie/globalassets/origin-green/og-publications/origin-green-progress-update-report-lr.pdf.

10 Teagasc (2020). Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) Interim Report #1 2018 – 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/news/2020/ASSAP-Interim-Report---1.pdf.

11 Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (2021). Forest Statistics – Ireland 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/15b56-forest-statistics-and-mapping/#annual-forest-sector-statistics.

12 Teagasc (2011). Teagasc Hedge Map. Retrieved from: https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2010/The-Irish-hedge-map-version1_5690.pdf.

13 Farmers Journal (2021). Irish farmers embracing fertiliser plastics recycling. Retrieved from: https://www.farmersjournal.ie/irish-farmers-embracing-fertiliser-plastics-recycling-598886.

- Irish farmers have strong credentials in animal husbandry with the use of antibiotics well below the EU average. In 2016, Irish sales of antimicrobial agents for food producing animals were 42% of the EU average.[14]

- While water quality has declined somewhat in recent times, Irish waterways remain among the cleanest in Europe.[15] Ireland remains the only EU member state with 0% of groundwater stations reporting a nitrates concentration 50mg/l , the EU average stands at 13.3%.[16] Irish farmers are doing their part in addressing water quality through programmes such as the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) which is tasked with improving the water quality of 390 catchments through diagnostic measures and prescriptive actions.

- Over the past 8 years, 229 farmers across all counties in Ireland have volunteered to participate in the Smart Farming resource efficiency programme. This assisted them to make changes to their farming practices which if implemented would reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 5-7% and their input costs by €5000 on average. The Smart Farming programme also engaged with over 5000 farmers through discussion groups. An additional 40 farmers have volunteered to take the Smart Farming challenge in 2021.

- Irish farmers have a strong track record of participating in agri-environment schemes. Today, 33% of Ireland's land is farmed under agri-environment measures compared to a 13% average at EU-27 level. Over 50,000 farmers participated in the Green Low-Carbon Assurance Scheme (GLAS), the most recent agri-environment programme.[17]

14 European Medicines Agency (2018). Sales of veterinary antimicrobial agents in 30 European countries in 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/documents/report/sales-veterinary-antimicrobial-agents-30-european-countries-2016-trends-2010-2016-eighth-esvac_en.pdf.

15 EPA (2018) Water Quality in 2019 An Indicators Report. Retrieved from: https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/water/waterqua/waterqualityin2019-anindicatorsreport.html.

16 EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2018) REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT on the implementation of Council Directive 91/676/EEC concerning the protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources based on Member State reports for the period 2012–2015. Retrieved from:https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0257

17 European Commission (2018). Environment and Climate Action (Summary) - (EU27) - European Union 27. Retrieved from: https://agridata.ec.europa.eu/extensions/DashboardIndicators/Environment.html?select=EU27_FLAG,1.