

Good afternoon and welcome to the 70th AGM of the Irish Farmers' Association.

It is a milestone event that marks seven decades of our work on behalf of farmers.

Tomorrow, we will welcome the new EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Food here to the Irish Farm Centre.

At our AGM Dinner this evening, we will honour some of those who have represented farmers in more recent years.

2024 was a remarkable year. We had local elections, European elections and then a General Election.

On Monday, we had a new US President take office.

As I speak, the Dáil is electing a new Taoiseach and he will appoint a new Minister for Agriculture later today.

Tomorrow, we will meet our new EU Commissioner Christophe Hansen. There has never been such change in leadership roles in such a short space of time.

The new Programme for Government was published last week.

While it might be light on specific financial commitments, there is no doubt but that it signals a change of direction.

Instead of trying to shut down farming there is an acknowledgment that we have a big part to play in this economy.

We knew that 2024 was going to be a big election year.

Our objective was to ensure that farming would be front and centre in the various election campaigns.

By any measure I think we achieved that.

We had our 'Enough is Enough' campaign, our local council campaign, our election manifestos with the CORE, LOCAL and CENTRAL key asks.

We also had our four European election hustings and our event in The Curragh which was addressed by the Taoiseach.

On November 12th we had all three leaders of the main political parties here in this room as part of the General Election campaign to listen to our members.

That was a sign of the credibility the organisation has established over the last 70 years.

The biggest factor in holding our politicians to account is our branch and county executive structure. It is the work you put in, day in-day out, on the ground.

Keeping in touch with your local politicians. Constantly working for farmers.

IFA is the people in this room and your colleagues at county and branch level.

We can be hard on ourselves as an Association, but I think we should be proud of the job we did in 2024.

While we will acknowledge the past, we must focus on the future.

This year we launched our new 'Ready to Lead' programme with the support of FBD and Skillnet. The objective of this programme is to develop the next generation of farm leaders for our Association.

As with every new year, our AGM is an opportunity to assess the challenges ahead.

We are meeting at a pivotal time for our sector, halfway through this decade, and halfway to 2050.

The shape of farming in 2030 and beyond will be determined in large part by the actions of the new Government and the new EU Commission.

The people spoke last November, and it is now time to get down to work.

It will be our job over the next five years to ensure that the new Government delivers for farmers.

Once the full Government line-up is confirmed later today, we will be engaging with them and we will hold them to account.

We raised a number of issues for the discussions around the Programme for Government.

There are too many to mention here, but they can be summed up by saying:

The new Government has to find a better way to work with farmers.

Whatever the issue, the approach has to be practical, flexible and grounded in common sense.

Too often, unnecessary obstacles are being put in front of farmers.

The environment scheme ACRES is a good example of this. Or maybe the worst example. It has certainly generated acres of paper.

A potentially good scheme undone by its own terms and conditions.

It is a good example of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

It has been a headwreck for farmers, for planners and for the Department who have struggled to administer the scheme.

The Minister has commenced a review of the scheme but, already, that review has the hallmarks of re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

I said in The Curragh and I am saying it here again today: there must be a fundamental review of ACRES.

The cost of doing business and regulation is frustrating farmers and further adding to our cost base.

Our Director of Policy and Chief Economist Tadhg Buckley produced a paper that shows costs on farms have risen by nearly 75% in the last seven years.

At the same time, farm incomes have fallen by 34%.

It's an issue that the new Government must tackle.

Whether it's the work of the new EU Commission or the new Government that takes over today, we need a new deal for farmers.

A deal that recognises and rewards those who are doing the work.

We have a huge challenge to attract the next generation of farmers. But we must start by securing the current generation.

We need incentives to encourage new people into farming.

The best way of supporting the next generation of farmers is for them to see the current generation being viable and having a standard of living comparable with others in society.

A combination of falling farm incomes and better opportunities elsewhere in the economy makes it very difficult to convince young people to commit their futures to farming.

The new Government will have the task of negotiating the next CAP.

We will be pushing our message through the IFA office in Brussels to get a deal that works for Irish farming.

We have seen a dangerous shift away from supporting food production.

To be frank, the last EU Commission became detached from farmers and in many ways detached from reality.

It wasn't prepared to listen to farmers and it ignored our input.

The CAP has to get back to its roots, support food production, and be properly funded to do so.

At national and EU level, separate funding has to be found for climate action.

The days of raiding our CAP funding must come to an end.

On CAP, once taking office, the new Minister will have to deal with the thorny issue of GAEC 2 on peat soils.

Since 2021 when this element of EU conditionality appeared on the horizon IFA has been lobbying to have this GAEC removed or amended.

It should have been dealt with in the so-called EU simplification process last year when other GAECs were amended, but there was little or no support from other countries.

We were successful in having it deferred for 2023 and 2024, but the Department is under pressure to implement it for 2025.

The recent proposals published by the Dept are being considered by our Committees. This is a huge issue for the new Minister.

We need a sensible solution that protects the thousands of farmers making a living on these soils.

As we face into 2025 there are real and present threats on the horizon.

For decades, we have lived with the scourge of Bovine TB but it is now at its worst level in many years. There are few issues that have as big an impact at farm level.

The Department is coming with yet another set of proposals.

I want to make it clear that while IFA will be responsible in how we approach the upcoming discussions with the Department. We need an approach that deals effectively with all the vectors of the disease.

Sticking with Animal Health, the risks of Bluetongue arriving on the island are significant. This would do huge damage to our sector.

The Foot and Mouth case in Germany is also a cause for real concern.

Farmers are making progress in meeting our emissions targets.

Reducing emissions by reducing production is as big a folly as reducing emissions by importing electricity.

There has to be a proper balance between environment policy, economic policy and social policy.

Cutting back on farm output and food production would be national sabotage.

Global demand for meat and dairy is growing.

If we don't produce it here, it will be produced in other countries with a much bigger environmental impact.

For the last five years, the EU Commission and the Irish Govt have implemented policies that reduced production.

This has to stop. The language from the EU and the Government appears to have changed but it must be backed by real intent and real money.

Before Christmas, the EU Commission rammed through a deal with the Mercosur countries.

The President of our EU Commission flew to Uruguay to join hands with the leaders of the Mercosur countries, to proclaim the good news.

We have a fight on our hands to get the deal blocked. But it is a fight we are up for.

Both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste sat in this room last November and said they were opposed to the deal. This commitment is reaffirmed in the Programme for Government.

They must now work with other Member States to build support to reject the deal.

The manoeuvre by Ursula von der Leyen last month was a bad start for the new Commission.

To be clear, and we will make this point to the EU Commissioner tomorrow, we don't want vague promises of 'compensation'.

We don't want a Sell Out. We want a level playing field.

On the issue of trade, President Donald Trump has been very vocal in his comments regarding tariffs on international goods.

These could do serious damage to Irish farming. Every diplomatic effort must be made to avoid damaging tariffs being introduced on Irish exports.

The new Govt must deliver on their commitment to the retention of our Nitrates Derogation this year.

Whatever needs to be done must be done. The new Programme for Government contains a strong commitment to fight for the derogation in Brussels.

The decision to have a Cabinet committee chaired by the Taoiseach shows the willingness to give this the attention that is needed.

Irish farmers are doing a huge amount to address water quality.

And we are seeing the results come through. We, as farmers, must continue with that work.

However, we cannot allow others to ruin it for us. Irish Water and our local authorities must get their house in order.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the work done by farmers in the recent cold spell. It showed the community spirit amongst the farming community.

I think we can do more in this space if we are allowed.

We will be making a submission to Government to put a more formal arrangement in place so farmers are insured for such works and that a proper system is in place.

2025 is a new beginning.

We have a new EU Commission, a new EU Commissioner, a new Government, a new Taoiseach, a new Minister for Agriculture, and three new Ministers of State for Agriculture.

But 70 years on, we are still here and we will hold them to account.

Thank You.