



Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture and Food

IFA Deputy President Alice Doyle

Farmer Mental Health & Wellbeing

Wed, 9th July 2025

Chairman and Committee Members, I would like to thank you for inviting IFA to address you today.

I am joined by IFA Farm Family & Social Affairs Chair Teresa Roche and Social Affairs Policy Executive Claire McGlynn.

Farming Community

Farming is more than an occupation in Ireland. It is a way of life that shapes our rural communities, our economy, and our national identity. But behind pride, tradition, and hard work, there is a growing and pressing concern: the mental health and wellbeing of our farmers.

Farmers face unique stressors: financial pressures, market uncertainty, isolation, regulatory complexity, unpredictable weather, and the emotional weight of maintaining a family legacy. There is no “clocking out,” and very little room for rest.

Despite these challenges, many farmers are slow to seek help. Cultural norms around stoicism, combined with limited access to services in rural areas, mean that emotional distress often goes unspoken and untreated.

Mental Health & Wellbeing

When we talk about supporting agriculture, we often focus on prices, supports and trade. But the wellbeing of the person behind the gate is just as important.

A farmer struggling with stress, anxiety, or depression is more at risk of making unsafe decisions, more likely to withdraw socially, and less likely to engage with services that could help improve their farm and their life.

Good mental health leads to better judgement, stronger relationships, and more sustainable farming practices. If we want a healthy farming sector, we need to support healthy farmers.

A recent study conducted by University College Dublin has laid bare the extent of this crisis.

More than half of the farmers surveyed reported levels of depression ranging from moderate to extremely severe. Nearly 45 percent experienced significant anxiety, and over one-third reported high levels of stress. Perhaps most worrying, almost one in four farmers surveyed was found to be at risk of suicide. These are not just statistics. They represent real people - our neighbours, our friends, our family members who are experiencing severe distress, often in silence.

Initiatives to raise awareness, train agricultural advisers in mental health literacy, and provide better access to rural services are extremely important. However, we now need to move beyond recognition. We need action that is co-ordinated, properly funded, and grounded in what farmers themselves are telling us.

That begins with treating mental wellbeing not as an afterthought, but as a core part of agricultural sustainability. It means ensuring that services are not only available, but accessible in terms of time, location, and cultural fit.

It means putting trained counsellors and peer support into the spaces where farmers already go - marts, discussion groups, co-ops, and farm events. It means integrating psychological education and coping skills into rural training and community outreach programmes.

And crucially, it means involving farmers directly in the design and delivery of those supports, so that nothing feels imposed or out of touch with their lived experience.

We cannot expect farmers to thrive when they are isolated, unheard, and overwhelmed. We cannot expect rural Ireland to flourish while those who hold it together are burning out. This is not just a farming issue. It is a public health issue, a rural development issue, and a national responsibility.

IFA has taken direct action to this problem. We are proud to be leading on this issue - not just in words, but in action, through a very successful project we have run and continue to run in partnership with Croí, the heart and stroke charity, and funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The aim of this project has been simple but powerful. IFA is delighted to confirm that the Farmer Health Check Project is returning this year, and we thank the Department of Agriculture for their funding towards this very important initiative.

By setting up health checks and wellbeing conversations at marts across the country, we were able to meet farmers in familiar, trusted environments - places they go already, where they feel comfortable. We didn't ask them to come to us. We went to them. The result was not only hundreds of physical health screenings, but also open conversations about stress, diet, lifestyle, and emotional wellbeing. It helped to break down stigma, encourage early intervention, and show that looking after your health both physical and mental is not a weakness, but a strength.

This initiative worked because it was farmer-focused, accessible, and built on trust. But it also showed us the scale of the need. The demand for the service was high. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. And the lesson is clear: when services are brought to rural spaces in the right way, farmers will engage.

From this initiative, we saw troubling patterns emerge. The average wellbeing score among farmers was just 53.8%, indicating widespread low mood. 58% said they rarely or never felt relaxed, and 46% rarely felt optimistic about the future.

These figures paint a stark picture. This is not just stress, it is a persistent lack of calm, a lack of hope, and a lack of confidence in one's own ability to cope. It is emotional wear and tear accumulated over years of pressure, isolation, and unrelenting expectation. And for many, this emotional strain is invisible until it becomes unbearable.

Conclusion

The mental health and wellbeing of our farmers is not just a personal issue. It is a critical foundation of our food systems, rural economies, and community resilience. As we recognise the immense pressures they face, we must commit to breaking the stigma, improving access to support and ensuring no farmer has to struggle in silence.

By opening up the conversation and prioritising wellbeing, we take an important step towards healthier individuals, stronger rural communities and a more sustainable future. It's time to listen, support and act because caring for our farmers means caring for the land, the food and the future we all share.

ENDS.

Background

The IFA is Ireland's largest farming organisation, with over 72,000 farmer members covering all production systems. The Association is structured with 947 branches and 29 County Executives across the country. The IFA President and various Committee Chairmen, along with branch and county representatives are democratically elected by the farmer membership.

IFA represents all farming sectors at national, European and international level. Through our office in Brussels, the IFA represents Irish farmers on the European umbrella body of farm

organisations COPA/COGECA. In addition, the IFA is the representative for Irish farmers on the World Farmers' Organisation.