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IRISH

MARCH 2024

# FARMERS

## MONTHLY



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# EDITORIAL



Matt O'Keeffe, Editor

## LOW ADOPTION RATES STYMIE PROGRESS

I took some satisfaction reading an archive article in last month's *Irish Farmers Monthly* which I wrote almost 25 years ago. The article referred to the potential of sexed semen technology to transform our national calf-breeding profile. However, I did not expect it would take quite so long to become a widely used breeding tool. We must hope that the next stage of widespread adoption on all calf-breeding farms will not be so drawn out. In fairness, sexed semen back in 2000 was expensive, restricted to a few sires considered suitable, and was less than acceptable in terms of conception rates. We now have an Irish semen-sexing facility, there is a wide range of sire semen available, and the added cost over traditional AI is worthwhile, especially given the benefits to individual farmers and the livestock sector, generally. When used efficiently the conception rate is almost on a par with non-sexed AI semen, and farmers tend to target their first calvers and more fertile cows. With a very accurate traceability regime in place for our livestock, it should become far easier for farmers to maximise the benefits of using sexed semen. There are still gaps to be filled. Not all our milk producers, for instance, use milk recording on a regular basis. Without that information package on yields, protein and milk solids, it is not possible to run an efficient breeding programme. Co-ops are encouraging greater take-up of recording and the requirement to reduce the use of dry-cow therapy will further nudge slow adopters on the road to recording. In the 2000 article, I described commercial sexed semen as having the potential to have the same transformative impact on livestock breeding as AI itself had many decades ago. Likewise, I would now suggest that the widespread adoption of

genotyping and individual DNA sampling and analysis of all our livestock should be the next transformative breakthrough in cattle breeding. 'Follow the science', as the late Pdraig Walshe often said. In this instance, food producers never needed scientific progress and novel technologies more than we do today as we face unrelenting pressures to reduce our environmental impact while, at the same time, at least maintaining output. I would add in the research on the potential of novel clovers and associated advances in soil science, which we feature in this *Irish Farmers Monthly* issue, as having the potential to further enable us to protect and improve our livestock grazing model.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is not the emergence of relevant technologies. That is likely to accelerate as AI drives progress. What is important is that food producers are willing to adopt the necessary changes required to protect our licence to produce. It is easy to pat ourselves on the back for the progress we have made. The reality, however, is that we are still not at optimum grass production and utilisation thresholds. Ten tonnes of grass dry matter per hectare is well achievable on most of our grassland. We are not close to that figure, even on many milk production farms. Grass productivity on the majority of our dry stock farms is well short of that 10-tonne target. We acknowledge that grass is our only competitive advantage. It is the most cost-efficient feed for producing either milk or meat and there is a straightforward blueprint in place based on grass varieties, soil fertility and management practices to deliver increased productivity. We replace that productivity with supports and schemes that deliver income but which often distract from efforts to use our land more efficiently.

# CONTENTS

- 4 **Upfront**
- 8 **News**
- 12 **Interview**  
Jim Bergin, Tirlán CEO
- 14 **Farm Safety**  
Ciaran Roche, FBD
- 16 **Agri-economy**  
Ciaran Fitzgerald talks about true sustainability
- 20 **Feature**  
Combating coccidiosis in sheep
- 22 **IFM at 50**  
Continuing our trip down memory lane
- 42 **Feature**  
Farmers' mental health a priority
- 44 **ICMSA**
- 45 **Feature**  
Unlocking genetic potential
- 48 **Management Hints**
- 54 **Machinery**
- 68 **Rural Life**  
Interview: Oakpark managing director, David Brett
- 70 **Very End**

## FOCUS TILLAGE & INNOVATION

- 26 **Making grains for the environment**
- 28 **Premium grain for premium products**
- 30 **Clover and out: Calling time on chemical N**
- 34 **Winnovating - Irish companies making their mark**

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McLaren's Oscar Piastri.

## GLANBIA ON THE FAST TRACK

Glanbia is moving quickly to increase its Optimum Nutrition brand profile by becoming a sponsor of the McLaren Formula 1 racing team. The fascination with fast cars racing around a track escapes some people but there is no doubting the popularity of the sport and the huge exposure it receives across the globe. Milk consumption in its various forms is good for physical, psychological and mental wellbeing, and racing drivers such as Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri of the McLaren team need their wits about them as they compete at speeds of 220mph and upwards. As official sports nutrition partner of the McLaren Formula 1 Team for the 2024 season and beyond, Glanbia obviously hopes to retain its front runner status in the nutrition stakes. The sponsorship with McLaren should be a winning formula.

## IN WITH THE NEW

The new Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) president wasted no time in altering the established pecking order of IFA representation on the Farmer Business Developments' board (FBD). The IFA is entitled to nominate two representatives on the investment holding company that owns 26 per cent of FBD Insurance and effectively controls the insurance group. The protocol over many years was that previous IFA presidents were nominated for initial four-year terms and then renominated for a further four years. The nomination is in the gift of the current IFA president and this time out Francie Gorman dispensed with precedent and nominated a key ally to one of the positions, instead of renominating the sitting ex-president, Joe Healy, to a second term. While the outgoing IFA president Tim Cullinan received the nod to sit on the FBD board as a direct replacement for Eddie Downey, also a former IFA president, Francie dispensed with the services of Joe Healy, opting instead to appoint former Kilkenny County IFA chair, Jim Mulhall, to a board seat. Jim was a strong supporter of Francie's successful bid for the IFA presidency and is also a council member of Tirlán and former chair of the fresh milk producers representative grouping. Joe Healy, who was recently appointed board chair of the newly formed Agri Food Regulator was a notable supporter of defeated IFA presidential candidate, Martin Stapleton, who was beaten for the position last December by Francie Gorman.

## PESTICIDE CONCESSION NOT QUITE A FARMER WIN

Despite the generally accepted claim that the retreat by the EU Commission from introducing severe curtailments on the use of crop protectants, was in response to the European-wide farmer protests in recent months, the reality is somewhat less clear-cut. In an act of realpolitik, the Commission realised there was no chance of getting the proposed measures through the various Brussels institutions, where stalemate has reigned for the past two years, between those factions favouring even more stringent restrictions and those who believe that the proposals could make European farming uncompetitive in global food trade. Better to use the stalemate as a seeming concession to farmer groups and wait to revisit the

proposals until a new Commission and Parliament are formed later in the year than to waste a situation that could not be resolved in the short term in any case. Nothing concentrates a politician's mind like an election and MEPs did not welcome the prospect of canvassing for votes in regions and countries where the farming communities are in open rebellion. Even President von der Leyen, herself, is looking for a favourable nod to continue as Commission president after a new Commission is formed later this year and if the pesticide concession appeases EU governments under assault in their countries from angry farmers, then that improves her future job prospects. Never waste a crisis, especially when there are votes at stake.

## END OF AN ERA FOR CHANELLE PHARMA

Congratulations to Michael Burke who recently sold his pharmaceutical company, Chanelle Pharma, for a reported €300m. The company was founded in Loughrea, Co. Galway, almost 40 years ago by Michael and was recently sold to the British company, Exponent, a private-equity firm. Michael, who employs over 730 people in Ireland, the UK, Europe and Jordan, was a practising vet before embarking on a career in pharmaceutical production. Chanelle specialises in supplying generic drugs for both animals and humans – it was a bit of a thorn in the side of the bigger pharma companies when it was founded in 1985. But the move into developing generic human drugs was a master stroke. Over the years, the business established itself as a leading pharmaceutical manufacturer of both veterinary and medical products with an extensive portfolio of licences. The Chanelle group will remain an Irish-managed company with the current management team staying in place. We send Michael our best wishes in his retirement.

Michael Burke,  
founder of Chanelle Pharma.



National winners of the Agri Aware and BiOrbic Environmental Innovator's programme: Rián Reilly, James Carson and Heidi Verry of St Tiernan's College Crossmolina, Co. Mayo with their project titled 'Binformation'. Missing from the picture is Migeal Azanza.

## ENVIRONMENTAL INNOVATORS

**Congratulations to students from St Tiernan's College, Crossmolina, Co. Mayo who were crowned national champions of the transition year programme Environmental Innovators, recently.** Students Rián Reilly, James Carson, Heidi Verry and Migeal Azanza came out on top with their project titled Binformation. The students raised an important question: do we truly understand how to recycle items properly? Through a survey, they discovered that people were not entirely confident that they were disposing of their waste in the correct bin. The judges were impressed by the simplicity and relevance of the student's communication campaign style project. Second and third prizes were awarded to Tackling Silage Effluent submitted by Katie Larrisey and Lucy MacMahon from Scoil Mhuire Trim, and Community Kitchens submitted by Holly Cheevers and Haylie Foley from Greystones Community College.



## Developing calves from the inside out

Maeve Regan,  
Head of Ruminant Nutrition, Agritech

While the calf rearing may seem the most labour-intensive stage, the first season at grass can prove the most difficult stage to manage for many farmers. Nutritionally, success is measured by developing the calf as best as possible prior to introducing grazed grass.

Given that newborn calves are born with undeveloped rumens, the initial objective is to assist calves in developing the rumen before being weaned off milk, so that they become cost-effective forage consumers.

Rumen development begins within the first few days of life and is advanced by exposure to healthy bacteria from the environment and the consumption of solid feeds. Introducing a palatable calf-starter ration/nut from three days of age (18% Crude Protein) is important, along with access to fresh clean water and high-quality clean straw ad-libitum (no haylage/silage).

Weaning on a weight basis alone creates a false sense of security with how ready calves are for the next stage of nutrition. Weaning shouldn't be considered until calves are intaking a minimum of 1.5kg concentrate/day in grouped pens – signalling that the calves' dry matter intakes can cope with the transition to a 100% solid diet.

### What is happening to calves at grass?

Year-on-year, cases of calves suffering from setbacks once first turned out to grass crop up on farm. Animal health issues can also be a huge influencing factor.

Nutritionally, Spring grass is often high in oils like conjugated linoleic acid, sugars and potentially nitrogen, which young, underdeveloped rumens can find it hard to adjust to. Low covers of grass also have very little fibre – a key substrate for good rumen health.

Greater rumen development in early life will help combat such issues, alongside the following: offering concentrates post-turnout, grazing slightly heavier covers until calves have adapted to grazing, offering a fibre source to ease the transition and/or strip grazing calves to ensure stem content is also being grazed.

It's important to remember that calves are not yet fully functioning ruminants and therefore shouldn't be treated as such.

**For more information and calf rearing advice, contact your local Agritech Sales Advisor.**



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## AIB AGRI MATTERS WINTER EDITION HAS LANDED

In the current issue of AIB's *Agri-Matters*, Donal Whelton, head of agriculture food and fisheries at AIB, pointed out that 2023 was a very difficult year for the agricultural industry with challenging weather, reduced output prices and input costs that were slow to retreat, resulting in a tough period for most farming sectors. This issue of *Agri Matters* carries an article from Siobhan Kavanagh from Teagasc on the 12 steps to reducing greenhouse gases, and Eamon O'Reilly, AIB agri-advisor, examines the impact of the reduced Nitrates Derogation limit on farms and discusses the options available to impacted farmers.

Donal Whelton.



## JAMIE LEONARD JOINS IFAC

Jamie Leonard has been appointed as a director of agri-business within Ifac's growing food and agribusiness advisory team. Jamie headed up the *Irish Farmers Journal* group's circulation and marketing team for over 16 years. Ifac's food and agribusiness advisory team offer consultancy services to the food and agribusiness sector helping companies realise their growth ambitions. Advisory services include strategic growth planning including commercially focussed marketing, market research, food business consultancy, media relations, customer relationship management, and accessing grants and business supports.

## BOI AGRICULTURE INSIGHTS LAUNCHED LAST MONTH



Eoin Lowry.

According to Eoin Lowry, head of agriculture at Bank of Ireland, 2024 looks set to see improved profit levels for Irish farmers compared to 2023, mainly due to a reduction in fertiliser and feed costs. However, lower farm-gate prices, inflation across other farm inputs and environmental compliance costs, will put pressure on farm margins. Many farmers who invested in machinery or farm buildings in the past two years are now seeing some pressure on cashflow. Eoin suggests in BoI's agri-economics outlook publication that farmers who find themselves in that position, should apply to refinance co-op or merchant debt or seek additional working capital.



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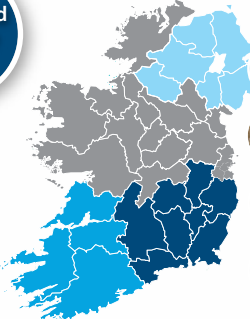


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# InTouch

## BEAT THE DROP

**CATHAL BOHANE**  
HEAD OF INTOUCH NUTRITION

As the days get longer, calving should be past its peak on most farms around the country. With most cows now calved, the major attention now turns to them. Juggling silage supply, quality, and grass as well as grazing conditions is no easy task, but keeping cows full and minimising large step changes are key to bringing about consistency, which is especially important for these freshly calved cows.

For the first six weeks of lactation, production levels will usually be exceptionally good. Great yields, and especially great fat and protein percentages, will be very prominent. Care needs to be taken on the back of these figures, however. These numbers are not solely down to nutrition of the animal but, rather, the result of a somewhat normal transition period where cows are losing some condition and this extra energy is a byproduct of this being reflected in the tank. It is important that you feed cows to their requirement in this period. Sometimes we can underfeed cows but because cows are milking so well, the process can be justified when body condition mobilisation is propping up the shortfall.

Your true levels of production, based on the cows' diet, will be evident around the middle of March. Milk yield will still power along, but milk fat and protein percentages will fall to more realistic levels – and those who skimmed during early lactation will see these percentages slip to worrying levels.

We need to manage milk protein levels by keeping starch and sugar levels up in the diet now and into the future, whether that is via grazed grass, concentrate, or conserved forage. It's not all about quality, either, so we also must pay attention to intake, as zero kilos of something high quality is still zero if we don't provide it. When it comes to milk fat, it is important to focus on the rumen health of the animal. While this idea is bandied around a lot, in essence it means adding the goodies (grains) as part of a balanced diet, including fibre-rich feedstuffs like forages or pulp sources. Also, don't feed them all at once. Spread them out over the course of the day.

Of course, you will always face challenges as these cows will be consuming over 100kg per day of varying quality in all types of weather. Offering a helping hand in the form of a live yeast such as Yea-Sacc will help maintain a healthy rumen and even out the bumps in the road, to keep milk fat where it should be. These are just some areas to look at to beat the drop in milk solids.

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## €1.5M TRADITIONAL FARM BUILDINGS SCHEME LAUNCHED

The 2024 Traditional Farm Buildings Grant Scheme has been launched with a pot of €1.5m available to fund the conservation and preservation of traditional farm buildings and structures such as historic yard surfaces, gates and gate pillars as part of the working farm. Many of the supported structures also provide roosting sites for bats and nesting sites for birds. The scheme, launched by Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Charlie McConalogue, is run in partnership with the Heritage Council.

Chief executive of the Heritage Council, Virginia Teehan commented: "The Heritage Council is very pleased to be administering this innovative scheme that by securing the historic building stock also recognises the role these buildings play as wildlife habitats and as contributors to our rural landscape. We know that many of these buildings can support a great diversity of wildlife, including species of conservation concern and this scheme works with farmers to support, enhance and safeguard the wildlife inhabiting these buildings."

"This grant scheme also actively supports the retention of traditional building skills in Ireland and a particularly satisfying impact uncovered in the evaluation is the increased awareness amongst farmers of their value and their readiness to use them in the future with 96 per cent of farmers surveyed more inclined now to use traditional craftworkers if they needed special works done. This is an impact for the sector with real longevity."



Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Charlie McConalogue, was the keynote speaker at the recent Farm Tractor & Machinery Trade Association (FTMTA) conference, *Navigating the Evolving Agricultural Machinery Landscape*. In his address, he said he recognised the importance of the role that FTMTA members play in contributing to the wider agricultural and food production system, and particularly in enabling the implementation of key policy commitments for the land use and the agriculture sector. Pictured at the event: Karol Duigenan, president of the Farm Tractor & Machinery Trade Association (FTMTA) and regional sales manager, Claas UK; Charlie McConalogue, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine; and Michael Farrelly, executive director, FTMTA. Photo: Jeff Harvey.





Damien O'Reilly  
EU Affairs and Communications Manager, ICOS

## LETTER FROM BRUSSELS

**In her State of the Union Address in Autumn 2023, EU Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen committed to setting up a strategic dialogue between farmers and environmentalists.** She said: "I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to our farmers, to thank them for providing us with food day after day. For us in Europe, this task of agriculture – producing healthy food – is the foundation of our agricultural policy. And self-sufficiency in food is also important for us. That is what our farmers provide."

The German, a favourite to retain her job later this year, was true to her word. At the end of January, a total of 27 organisations participated in the first meeting of the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of Agriculture ranging from farmers, co-operatives, NGOs, academics, and banks. The group is chaired by Professor Peter Strohschneider who chaired the Commission on the Future of Agriculture in Germany.

A report from the committee is due by late summer which 'will form the foundation of our future agricultural policy' according to Commissioner von der Leyen. The presidents of COPA and COGECA - the EU umbrella organisations representing farmers and cooperatives across Europe - are around the table and will have the opportunity to voice the views and frustrations of their members. And there are many, as we have seen from the recent spate of farmer demonstrations which took place sporadically across member states over the past few months.

There is no one single issue which has prompted the protests. Rather, farmers in different countries have their own local gripes. But one thread which joins the dots is red tape and bureaucracy. Income concerns and weather events are a daily concern which farmers have to cope with regardless. But EU policy demands which have come thick and fast in recent years when compared to other years has forced farmers to shout 'stop'.

And it seems that it is getting through to the powers that be, here in Brussels. The setting up of the strategic dialogue is a sort of recognition of the important and often underappreciated role of the EU food producer. But it will also give all stakeholders the opportunity to debate how exactly the EU Green Deal targets can be met whilst protecting food security and farm incomes. The Green NGOs are also part of the dialogue, and they will naturally be pushing for a reduction in pesticide use, better animal welfare standards, more land devoted to biodiversity and organic production. But this can only be achieved if the farmer's voice is heard too.

The recent decision by President von der Leyen to also bin the controversial Sustainable Use Regulation (SUR) and start again should not be seen by farmers as a complete peeling back on the key aims of the Green Deal. Instead, it can be interpreted as a recognition by the Commission that future tough agriculture-related policy decisions under the Green Deal banner must include input from stakeholders. The EU Commissioner said as much when effectively scrapping the current SUR proposal: "The SUR proposal has become a symbol of polarisation. It has been rejected by the European Parliament. There is no progress anymore in the Council either. So, we have to do something."

Farmers, food producers and co-operatives should not become complacent. Tough policies to meet environmental targets remain, along with all the other geopolitical problems of the world which impact us all. But as this current Commission comes to an end, there is at least some small comfort to be taken in the fact that there is some recognition that EU food producers have a voice.

## CASE STUDY CORK 2020: IMPROVING PREGNANCY RATES IN HEIFERS WITH INJECTABLE TRACE MINERALS

Herd fertility in pasture-based dairy farms is a key driver of farm economics<sup>1</sup>.

According to Teagasc, "a cow calving in May will generate €400 less profit than a cow calving in February, due to higher feed costs and reduced yield. For every 100 cows, compact calving is worth on average €10,000 – €12,000 (€100 – €120 per cow/year)"<sup>2</sup>

Age is particularly important in farming systems with restricted calving periods. Teagasc advise that the first step towards improving calving distribution is ensure heifers conceive early in the breeding season to generate large numbers of early-calving heifers<sup>12</sup>.

On a pasture-based farm in Cork in 2019 a farmer reported fertility issues in a group of 22 mixed British and Holstein Friesian heifers weighing 340-390 kg. Submission rate was low as only 17/22 received AI. Only 14/17 held to first service and 5 heifers did not come bulling for the first 3 weeks of the breeding season - all heifers eventually went in calf to the bull by the end of June when he was removed. When some of the heifers calved it was at the end of April, too late in the farmer's opinion.

The farmer wanted to get as many replacement heifers from these heifers as possible. He used conventional semen and each heifer only got one straw before the bull was introduced after the first 3 weeks. Due to the poor submission rate and his late calving heifers in 2019, the farmer sought advice from his local vet and in 2020 the farmer treated his heifers with a combination injectable trace mineral containing Zinc, Copper, Manganese and Selenium, 30 days prior to AI.

In the 2020 group there were 20 heifers - a submission rate of 90% in the first 3 weeks of breeding was achieved with 18/20 in calf to first service AI, the remaining 2 heifers showed signs of oestrus later but did not receive AI. The overall result therefore was a 90% submission rate in the first 3 weeks of service with 95% in calf to first service. Of the remaining heifers, one heifer held her first service to the bull and the other held to her second service. They were all scanned on the 7/08/20 and 20/20 were in calf > 85 days with 18 > 105 days in calf.

	2019	2020
Submission rate	77%	90%
Pregnancy in first 3wks of Breeding Season	64%	95%

It is estimated that every open day outside of the compact calving window costs the system €3.08/day/head<sup>3</sup>.

Heifers born in the first 21 days of the breeding season will come off grass heavier and hit puberty earlier meaning more efficient reproduction in the herd, a key driver of profitability. Age and weight at first breeding are closely correlated<sup>1</sup>. Heifers that were heavier at the start of breeding had increased incidence of oestrus and higher pregnancy rates at the end of the season than lighter animals<sup>1</sup>. In a 2013 study, it was reported that younger calving heifers achieved more days in milk over 5 years, with >44% of their days alive spent in milk production compared with only 18% - 40% in cows calving later<sup>4</sup>. Thus, good heifer fertility results in the best subsequent performance in future lactations.

Pre-breeding supplementation helps to raise not only the trace minerals but also the essential enzyme levels rapidly and effectively which could assist farmers to get cows and heifers back in calf in a tighter calving pattern.

A study from a leading US university demonstrated that cows receiving injectable trace mineral supplementation prior to mating had improved conception rates to fixed time AI and an improved calving distribution compared to those that did not receive supplementation<sup>5</sup>.

**Further information available from: Virbac Ltd. Unit 16 Woolpit Business Park, Windmill Avenue, Woolpit, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk IP30 9UP.**

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Ailish Brennan.

**Ailish Brennan has joined the Green Acre Marketing team as client relations director.** A graduate of language and marketing from Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), Ailish has worked in the agri-business sector for the past 17 years.

Commenting on her new role, Ailish said she is looking forward to building relationships with clients and supporting them to grow their business.

"I am a strategic thinker and I believe that my experience and passion for the industry will add value to the Green Acre offering. And having regularly crossed paths with Green Acre Marketing's managing director, Aileen Barron, the synergy we've already established will greatly assist in ensuring that the Green Acre team continues to deliver outstanding results for its clients."

## RVLs DETECT UPTICK IN SCHMALLEMBERG CASES



Deformed limbs (arthrogryposis) in a Friesian calf caused by Schmallenberg virus. Photo: Animal Health Surveillance/DAFM.

**The Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine's (DAFM) regional veterinary laboratories (RVLs) have detected an uptick in the number of confirmed cases of Schmallenberg virus (SBV), a midge-borne virus that can cause birth deformities in calves and lambs.**

One case in Tipperary involved a calf, while there were two outbreaks in sheep in Co. Wexford. SBV, which is carried by wind-borne infected midges, was first detected in Ireland in 2012. In Ireland, as with other affected countries, the impact of the disease was short-term, after immunity built up in cattle and sheep (through exposure and vaccination), according to the DAFM. Since then, there has been a small number of outbreaks; this has been a low-impact disease overall, except on a small number of farms. On these farms, animals were infected at the stage of

pregnancy when the foetus in utero is most susceptible to the effects of the virus, this unfortunately resulted in the birth of deformed off-spring.

While Schmallenberg continues to be regarded as a low-impact virus, the RVLs are emphasising the value of ensuring that deformed calves and lambs are submitted to them for testing, to increase the intensity and sensitivity of surveillance for both Schmallenberg virus and the potentially more impactful bluetongue virus (BTV). Both viruses can result in the birth of deformed offspring. Bluetongue has been detected in the UK and in Europe in the past year. Bluetongue can cause a wide spectrum of clinical presentations, and it would risk causing significant animal welfare impacts as well as trade challenges if it became established here.

Both viruses can cause a wide variety of birth deformities, especially deformed limbs (arthrogryposis), spinal curvature (scoliosis), torticollis (twisted neck), shortened lower jaw (brachygnathia inferior), and domed skulls (hydranencephaly). Some of these birth deformities can make natural calving or lambing very difficult and farmers should be alert to an increased risk of these ill effects in this season.

Bluetongue virus could come to Ireland through the wind-borne spread of infected midges, through the importation of infected animals or contaminated fomites or animal derived biological material (e.g. blood, semen). Farmers are advised to be vigilant and to ask their vet to refer any birth deformities in sheep or cattle to the nearest RVL for investigation.



Ciaran O'Sullivan.



Simon Delaney.

## TWO NEW HIRES AT MSD ANIMAL HEALTH

**MSD Animal Health Ireland has announced the appointment of two new hires to the business: Ciaran O'Sullivan, who will cover south Munster and Simon Delaney who will cover the southeast area.**

Ciaran spent almost nine years at dairy machinery manufacturer Dairymaster, where he held the position of regional sales manager for Cork, Waterford and Wexford. He replaces Billy Heffernan as on-farm sales rep for the south Munster territory and will cover Kerry, Cork, Limerick and Clare. Ciaran has farming in his blood and is the fifth-generation of his family to farm in Innishannon, Co. Cork where he farms a dairy herd and calf-to-beef system in partnership with his father. Ciaran studied a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture at MTU (then CIT) and graduated in 2013.

Simon replaces Ciara Phelan as the new on-farm sales rep for MSD Animal Health in the southeast, covering Tipperary, Waterford, Kilkenny, Carlow, Wexford, Wicklow, Kildare and Laois. Hailing from Cashel in Co. Tipperary, Simon grew up on a dairy farm and in recent years has joined a family farming partnership with his uncle, Eamon and father, Richard. Simon studied at SETU Waterford and graduated with a Bachelor Honours degree in agricultural science in 2018. Simon began his working career as a graduate trainee manager at Dawn Meats, before joining Grassland Agro later that year in a sales role.



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# COMING FULL CIRCLE

**JIM BERGIN, CEO OF TIRLÁN, WILL RETIRE FROM HIS ROLE WITH THE CO-OP IN JULY. IN A BROAD-RANGING INTERVIEW WITH MATT O'KEEFFE, JIM REFLECTS ON HIS CAREER WITH TIRLÁN AND ITS ANTECEDENTS, DEVELOPMENTS HE HAS WITNESSED IN THE IRISH DAIRY SECTOR OVER THE YEARS, AND HIS PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT IN SHAPING THE SEISMIC CHANGES THAT BROUGHT ABOUT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF TIRLÁN ITSELF**


**"I have enjoyed the job. It's a bit like farming," Jim tells me. "You don't look at it as a job. It has been a privilege and has been my life for 40 years."** As a 'lifer' starting out with the original Avonmore and then Glanbia and finally Tirlán, the Kilkenny native acknowledges the changing face of the organisation across the four decades: "I joined Avonmore as a graduate in 1984, having completed a Bachelor of Commerce in UCC. It's worth remembering that half my class left Ireland to find work at the time, so it was great to get an opportunity so close to home.

"I did experience a workplace outside of Avonmore when, after further part-time study, I took on a role in another company. After a year, I returned to Kilkenny, and I have been with Avonmore in its various guises since then. It was a realisation of the quality of the company and the workplace that drove that decision to return. Even though there was a lot of travel involved in my roles over the years, I never had to relocate. I spent 25 years working in the manufacturing plant at

Ballyragget, almost in view of the home farm and it was part of my existence from the time it was being built."

## **SHAPING A NEW DAIRY STRUCTURE**

The 1980s were a time of change in the Irish dairy sector and Avonmore took part in that evolution, Jim explains: "When I joined the organisation, Avonmore was a co-operative entity, owned exclusively by the milk producers. In 1988, it became a Plc and 34 years later, in 2022, we transitioned back to being a fully fledged co-op. The huge achievement in that time was the wealth creation on behalf of farmers, amounting to around €2bn; €900m has been transferred out into individual farmers' accounts with another €1.1bn still held in collective ownership in the co-op's balance sheet," he explains, adding that great credit is due to people who had the vision to make the decisions that delivered the wealth. "I would reference Pat O'Neill, Stephen Walsh, John Duggan and Johnny Dowley among them. As we know over the years, the Plc



## YOU DON'T LOOK AT IT AS A JOB. IT HAS BEEN A PRIVILEGE AND HAS BEEN MY LIFE FOR 40 YEARS

and the co-op haven't always been easy bedfellows because there is an objective from a farmer-shareholder perspective and a different one from the Plc standpoint. There was always that bit of angst between the two, but the entire structure still worked well," he says.

Now, the focus is simpler: "We have become a co-op again, with a new name and brand image. During January we completed our annual round of meetings with our co-op shareholders and my general reflection is that the conversations and debates are singular in nature. Management attitude is that whatever profits we make, we retain a modest margin of around 1.5 per cent and everything else goes to the farmer shareholder, through milk and grain prices and supports as well as shareholder dividends. It is a simpler model and reflects the ethos of a co-op, which has a singular function to serve the needs of its shareholder suppliers and members. The meetings with our members are a valuable refresher course for management. The chemistry of meeting and discussing the challenges being faced everyday by our suppliers is hugely important."

### DOUBLING OUTPUT

"We have a business with an international remit that is owned and directed by its co-operative shareholders. Since 2010 we have expanded our processing capacities in anticipation of the abolition of quotas. In

tandem with that, in 2013, the first stage of the return of our Irish dairy processing assets into cooperative ownership took place. Milk output on Tirlán farms has expanded by 95 per cent since 2015 with the processing capacity expanded to deal with that. The organisation spent €600m during that period. Despite that, we have borrowing levels similar to 2013.

Additionally, in 2017, the co-op gained full control and ownership of the agri-trading and consumer business sectors of the business. Finally, in 2022, full co-operative ownership was achieved."

Jim believes that the co-op model is the best structure for farmers. "In a world that is very volatile and challenging, having a single agenda is very important.

The Plc structure worked well with the likes of Siobhan Talbot and John Moloney providing strong leadership and business expertise with a global perspective. The development of a nutrition focus has added enormously to the value of Glanbia Plc. At this stage we have two head offices in Kilkenny with two global organisations and a lot of wealth created for two distinct sets of shareholders. Most of the people in Tirlán have experienced the business disciplines of a Plc culture and that discipline equips them well to achieve and deliver in a co-operative structure. Strategy and operations can be managed in the manner of a Plc but with a co-operative ethos. The interface with our farmer members must reflect that co-operative culture."

### LOCAL CONNECTIONS

As well as being a global-facing international dairy business, Tirlán retains its local affinity, something Jim is particularly pleased about: "We retain that relationship, nowhere more so than in our sponsorship of Kilkenny GAA. It's a 30-year relationship at this stage, almost unheard of in sponsorship commitments. The

sponsorship reflects the nutritional benefits of dairy products for athletes and delivers a high-profile marketing opportunity for Tirlán. "Belview is being commissioned and will be a major benefit for Tirlán in the years ahead. It is expected to pay out upwards of €120m annually to milk suppliers."

### CONSOLIDATION NEEDED

"The natural evolution, as we have seen previously, is that consolidation will continue to be a part of the Irish dairy story. The strongest take over the weakest at its most extreme. Compared to global experiences in the dairy sector, Ireland has not consolidated at the same pace as other countries. The Dutch and Danish experience has seen one organisation now controlling 80 per cent of the entire milk pool in those countries. Scale is important. I think that, over the past 10 or 15 years, we have come through a period of very slick supply chains, and technology has made the transport and monitoring of supply very efficient. In the past two years that model has come under pressure from wars, epidemics and political upheavals across the world. That makes it difficult for businesses, be they processors or producers, to achieve their aims and ambitions. The stronger the structures in those situations, the more opportunities present themselves. Weaker entities are more at risk. I would prefer if the Irish dairy industry had greater scale and was able to dominate some markets internationally."



**IN A WORLD THAT IS VERY VOLATILE AND CHALLENGING, HAVING A SINGLE AGENDA IS VERY IMPORTANT**



## NAVIGATING THE TERRAIN

CIARAN ROCHE, FBD RISK MANAGER, STRESSES THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING QUAD BIKE SAFETY

In November 2023, significant changes in regulations regarding quad bike operation under the 'Safety Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations came into effect. These new regulations were in response to concerns over the number of fatal and serious work-related accidents involving quad bikes or all terrain vehicles (ATVs), particularly in the agriculture and forestry sectors.

### NEW REGULATIONS: WHAT FARMERS AND CONTRACTORS NEED TO KNOW

The new regulations mandate that all quad bike operators in the workplace must complete a quad bike training course provided by a registered training provider to a QQI standard or equivalent. Additionally, operators are required to wear appropriate head protection while operating a quad.

### UNDERSTANDING QUAD BIKE SAFETY

A quad bike is an extremely useful piece of equipment for farm work, designed to handle diverse terrain types. However, improper operation can pose significant risks of death or severe injury to operators. Key safety concerns include training, experience, personal protective equipment (PPE), maintenance, and terrain knowledge. Operators must be at least 16 years old to operate farm-type quad bikes, which is usually stated clearly on the vehicle.

### COMMON CAUSES OF ACCIDENTS

The main causes of deaths or serious injuries involving quad bikes include vehicle

### PRACTICAL SAFETY MEASURES

Get training: All quad bike operators must undergo training to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for safe operation. Training should cover the use of any towed equipment or attachments.

1. Wear appropriate PPE: Head protection, in the form of an approved helmet, is essential to reduce the severity of head injuries. Operators should also consider additional PPE such as gloves and safety footwear.
2. No passengers: Quad bikes are designed for single riders. Carrying passengers increases the risk of accidents and should be avoided.
3. Avoid overloading: Overloading can disrupt weight distribution and impair braking. Operators should adhere to manufacturers' towing capacity and loading limits.
4. Maintain your quad: Regular maintenance checks ensure that the quad bike is in good working order, minimising the risk of accidents due to mechanical failures.

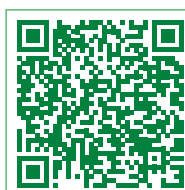
overturns, collisions with structures or objects, being trapped under an overturned machine, and accidents involving pedestrians. These incidents often stem from factors such as lack of formal training or experience, excessive speed, carrying passengers or unbalanced loads, and poor maintenance.

### ADDITIONAL SAFETY TIPS

- ▶ Familiarise yourself with the terrain to mitigate risks associated with slopes, obstacles, and unfamiliar terrain.
- ▶ Adhere to road-use regulations if operating quad bikes on public roads.
- ▶ Remember the minimum age for operating farm type working quad bikes is at least 16 years of age, it is usually clearly stated on the quad.

Quad bike safety is paramount in preventing accidents and protecting lives. By adhering to regulations, undergoing training, and implementing practical safety measures, operators can ensure a safer working environment. Remember, safety should always be the top priority when operating quad bikes.

For more farm safety information scan the code





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Ciaran Fitzgerald  
Agri-food economist

# Let's talk true sustainability

## RECENT CONFIRMATION THAT THE NEW AGRI-FOOD REGULATOR WILL NOT TAKE ON BELOW-COST SELLING IS THE RESULT OF FLAWED AGRI-FOOD POLICY, WRITES CIARAN FITZGERALD

Last week saw a clarification by Joe Healy, chair of the board of An Rialálaí Agraibhia, the new agri-food regulator, that it will not be addressing the issue of below-cost selling as part of its remit. No surprise, perhaps, but a critical issue, nevertheless. Below-cost selling/loss leading is a critical challenge to the basic economics of Irish Currentlly, retailers sell fresh products like liquid milk, cheese and fresh meat and, in particular, fresh fruit and vegetables at low or no margin to attract customer footfall. While the retailer can and does recover margin from the broad range duce supplier does not have that opportunity. Loss leading is a significant issue for the dairy and meat sectors but the fact that these sectors have huge export markets gives them some leverage against dominant retail buying power. In contrast, the fruit and vegetable sector does not, and loss leading/margin erosion has been a key factor in the huge decline in Irish production of fruit and vegetables over the last thirty years. This failure to align policy on food pricing with aspirations on food production is unfortunately a significant and critical flaw in not just Irish but EU agri-food policy.

### What we know

In the absence of joined-up thinking on price and production, the real economics of fruit and vegetable production in Ireland is likely to follow the pattern of recent years.

1. We know that supermarkets and discount retailers control 96 per cent of the market for fruit and vegetables in Ireland.
2. We know from these retailers that Irish and other consumers in the EU single market want access to

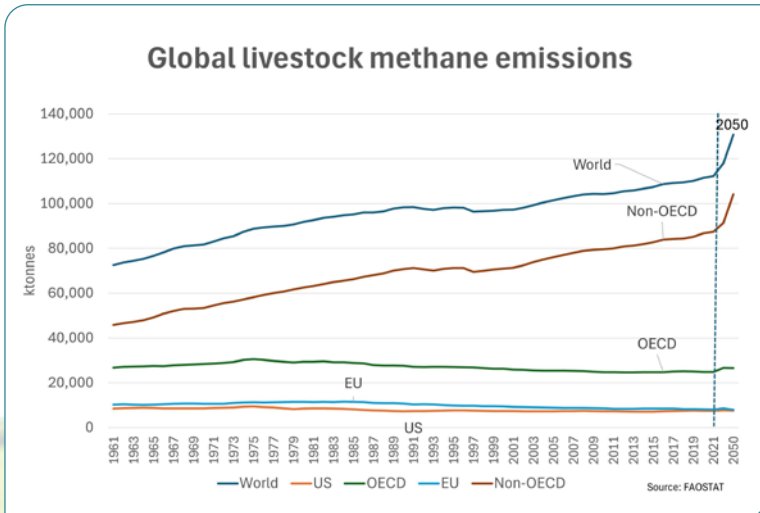
an expanding range of fruit and vegetables on a 52-week basis.

3. We know that producers in Europe with access to cheap natural gas, like in Holland for example, or with a more benign climate, like in southern Spain or Italy, can deliver a significant part of the 52-week requirement.
4. We know that global distribution supply chains can and do deliver the remainder on a 52-week basis.
5. We know that all these producers have lower production costs for the broad range of products demanded than Irish producers.
6. We also know, critically, that food retailers see fruit and vegetables as loss leaders, i.e. products sold on promotion, used to bring in footfall, and so neither the retailer nor the producer is earning big returns on these products.
7. We know that the reality of this diminishing margin return has meant that the number of fruit and vegetable producers in Ireland has declined by over 60 per cent in the last 20 years, reflecting the evolving economic reality set out above.
8. We know that a further consideration in terms of fruit and vegetable production on suitable land on the eastern seaboard has been demand for land for development /house building.
9. We know that programmes looking at the strategic development of the sector have been produced within the context of the Food Harvest process and while growth is aspired to. Nobody with any real knowledge of the sector thinks that fruit and vegetable production is in anyway likely to replace grass-based food production in Ireland.

### Economic reality

At the risk of stating the obvious, the ever shrinking size and profile of the Irish fruit and vegetable sector reflects economic reality, as does the size and profile of the dairy and meat sectors.





Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).



**WHILE THE RETAILER CAN AND DOES RECOVER MARGIN FROM THE BROAD RANGE OF PRODUCTS IN THE GROCERY BASKET, THE FRESH PRODUCE SUPPLIER DOES NOT HAVE THAT OPPORTUNITY**

And, yet, there is a continuing narrative from environmental lobbyists and wishful thinkers that states that the ever-diminishing production of fruit and vegetables in Ireland represents a blindness to missed opportunity.

This is, in my view, equivalent to suggesting that the German car industry, which is struggling right now, should not focus just on moving from producing diesel cars to electric vehicles but should, instead, start making bicycles, which are clearly more climate friendly. This plant-based obsession does not trump basic economics and is significantly out of sync with the more balanced thinking emanating from the World Food Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and others, and indeed the 2015 Paris Accord on climate change..

### A global reality

A consistent feature of the global debate on climate action has been a realisation that there are balancing factors to be managed when it comes to meeting the requirements to reduce emissions from agriculture and the need to continue to produce food for a growing global population. Recognising this dilemma, the Paris Accord and the most recent COP 28 emphasise the equal imperative of feeding a global population that is forecast to grow from six billion people to nine billion people by 2050.

Indeed, Article 2 of the Paris Accord specifically commits its signatories (including Ireland) to 'increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development'.

The FAO submission to COP 28 talks about intensifying livestock production in 'relevant locations'. FAO/OECD forecasts out to 2030 show an increase in

global demand for meat and dairy currently met from unregulated regions because of restrictions on output in the EU and US. So, in the absence of a more balanced approach, as outlined above, suppression of production in the EU /Ireland will have the perverse effect of increasing global emissions from food production.

### Sustainability through specialisation

The Irish Agri food sector has demonstrated a huge competence in absorbing a myriad of shocks and market upheavals over the last thirty years while steadfastly focusing on the evolving needs of its consumers, across 110 countries globally. With exports counting for 90 per cent plus, of our production of dairy and meat products, an ability to stay ahead of evolving consumer trends, while also coping with volatility and disruption, has been a definitive requirement in sustaining the Irish Agri food sector. The sector supports 220,000 real livelihoods and 800 real businesses, according to the CSO, that multi-annually supply millions of tonnes of food to 110 countries across the world.

Demand for Irish grass-based dairy and meat products is increasing. A continuing focus on improving the economic and environmental sustainability of this core aspect of the Irish national economy is critical to sustaining the economic and social relevance of the agri sector to the National Irish economy.

Moreover, focusing on low emissions efficiency is increasingly in tune with a global narrative that recognises the need for specialisation and balance in addressing the twin global challenges of emissions reduction and feeding a growing global population. Magical thinking about a plant-based Nirvana won't trump the core realities of basic economics and the ongoing refusal at EU and local Irish level to join up policy on regulating food production with food pricing.



# COMBATting COCCIDIOSIS WITH PROMPT CORRECTIVE ACTION

**COCCIDIOSIS IS A COMMON PARASITIC INFECTION OF LAMBS, USUALLY SEEN FROM FOUR WEEKS TO SIX MONTHS OF AGE. HERE, ELEANOR BRADY, RUMINANT VETERINARY MANAGER, MSD ANIMAL HEALTH, OUTLINES WHY PROMPT CORRECTIVE ACTION IS REQUIRED FOR THIS GROUP DISEASE**

**It is caused by the protozoan parasite *Eimeria*.** There are many different species of *Eimeria*; some are more likely to cause severe disease (more pathogenic) than others. *Eimeria ovinoidealis* and *Eimeria crandallis* are two pathogenic species of this parasite that are host-adapted to sheep, meaning that they cannot infect or come from other species of animals on farm, such as cattle or poultry. The life cycle of *Eimeria* is complex and generally takes up to four weeks to complete. This is why coccidiosis is not usually seen in lambs younger than four weeks of age. In *Eimeria* infection following oocyst ingestion, the parasite invades the cells lining the intestines. The parasite replicates inside and bursts out of these cells, causing extensive,

often long-term damage to the gut. Oocysts, or eggs, are produced in the gut and expelled in the infected animal's faeces. Oocysts are then consumed by other animals in the flock through exposure to infective oocysts in faeces and so the cycle continues.

## CLINICAL

Oocysts are shed in the faeces of both sick and healthy animals and can quickly build up high numbers both outdoors and indoors. Adult sheep may carry and shed low numbers of *Eimeria* oocysts. They do not show clinical signs of coccidiosis like lambs do, as they are usually immune to the effects of the parasite by adulthood. Ewes, however, may shed more oocysts in response to stress at lambing time.

Newborn lambs can be infected when exposed to the faeces of adult animals or sick animals and, thereafter, show clinical signs when the life cycle has been completed approximately four weeks later.

In clinical cases of coccidiosis, lambs are off form, straining to defecate, dehydrated, off their feed, and scouring. Scour will sometimes contain blood. In severe cases, lambs may strain with such force that they prolapse their rectums. Lambs at this stage are difficult to treat and may subsequently die. Clinical cases such as this are often the tip of the iceberg.

## SUBCLINICAL

Coccidiosis is well-known to be a group disease, with other lambs in the flock most

likely harbouring rising levels of the parasite also. Subclinical coccidiosis is a widely recognised hindrance to lamb performance. In subclinical cases of coccidiosis, lambs do not show obvious signs of illness. Subclinical coccidiosis is associated with reduced daily weight gain and failure to thrive. Coccidiosis can be diagnosed by your vet using faecal sampling. Faecal oocyst identification is important in coccidiosis outbreaks, as confirmation of the species and level of burden can aid in decisions pertaining to disease control strategy. Prevention of coccidiosis is preferred over treatment. Oocysts are extremely resistant and can survive in the environment for at least one year. They can withstand both high and low temperatures leaving many farmers frustrated when disease on their farm becomes an annual problem.

#### HYGIENE

Hygiene is of the utmost importance in coccidiosis control. Lambing pens are excellent sources of *Eimeria* oocysts, particularly when not cleaned out regularly and properly. As coccidiosis is spread faecal-orally, it is important to ensure that feeding troughs and water sources are clean and free of faeces. If troughs are used for feeding outdoors these should be moved regularly to avoid build-up of oocysts around feeding spots. Good drainage and a dry environment are essential for coccidiosis control indoors, as coccidiosis thrives in damp conditions. When choosing a disinfectant, ensure that the product is effective against coccidian

It is worth noting that toltrazuril has been shown to be very persistent, mobile in soil and toxic to plants including crop species. Manure from treated animals with toltrazuril products must be diluted with at least three times the weight of manure from mature cows. Diclazuril does not carry this environmental warning.

oocysts and that the correct contact time is adhered to. Many disinfectants do not work in the presence of organic matter (faeces) so surfaces must be thoroughly cleaned prior to application.

#### IMMUNITY

Lambs may initially be protected against coccidiosis by antibodies consumed in colostrum, but levels of these antibodies soon begin to wane. At this point, lambs need to mount their own immune response to the parasite through environmental exposure. Coccidian immunity is very much a balancing act: avoiding exposure to high numbers of oocysts to prevent clinical outbreaks, while allowing exposure to low levels for immunity development. Understandably, it can be difficult to predict how many oocysts a lamb will be exposed to. Some farmers may recognise a pattern in coccidiosis outbreaks on farm, while others remain at a complete loss. Many choose to administer antiprotozoal treatments in advance of risk periods.

#### TREATMENT

Diclazuril and toltrazuril are two antiprotozoal drugs commonly found in oral drenches used to control coccidiosis in lambs and calves. The choice between these two drugs has long been a topic of debate. In one study, calves treated with diclazuril demonstrated better average daily weight gains compared to calves treated with toltrazuril. In addition, calves treated with diclazuril seemed to have had better exposure to *Eimeria*, leading to the development of protective immunity. Diclazuril has a short duration of action, allowing animals to be exposed to the parasite while building a natural immunity, decreasing the chances of reinfection later. In another study, calves treated with diclazuril had lower numbers of oocysts in their faeces after 42 days, while calves treated with toltrazuril shed higher numbers of oocysts in their faeces after this time. Coccidiosis is a well-recognised cause of disease and underperformance in Irish flocks, affecting lambs all over the country. When coccidiosis is diagnosed on farm, prompt corrective actions are crucial. There is no one-size-fits-all approach in coccidiosis control. It is important to always treat all the lambs in a group, as coccidiosis is a group problem, not an individual problem. A combination of improved husbandry practices and careful anticoccidial product use can aid in management. Your vet can recommend the product most suited to allowing safe immunity development in your lambs and advise on administration timings for your flock.

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UP FRONT

## BEEF - A DECADE OF DISCONTENT

Intervention problems, fines, accusations, counter-accusations and the Beef Tribunal have ensured a cloud of confusion reigned over our major industry. DES CROWLEY chronicles the past decade for *Irish Farmers Monthly*.

The main objective of the politicians who are mounting the ferocious Dail attacks on the Department of Agriculture and Larry Goodman is to win the Beef Tribunal on their own ground. They believe that the lawyer-infested Tribunal failed to deal with Goodman and allowed the Department to escape with mild structures. They see evidence of this failure in the £70 million EU fine levied against the Department in 1996 and in the host of matters which they have raised at Public Accounts Committee (PAC) hearings.

The Department's critics such as Des O'Malley and Pat Rabbitte have clearly relished the opportunity to pillory Departmental officials without the presence of lawyers, PR men or consultants. Their conviction is that Goodman and the other barons still have too much influence over the Department. To make matters worse, Goodman had a connection with Haughey, especially when announcing his massive expansion (that never happened) in the late eighties, first revealed, incidentally, by this correspondent.

In addition to returning the Tribunal via the PAC - and forcing the Department to start more cases against beef barons - the critics have adopted a new policy since Tribunal days. This is to concentrate fire on the



**The Crisis Continues**

amounts outstanding between him and the Department. The counter argument is that the Department should take over many cases against him.

Their campaign led to the recent serving of writs against seven Goodman companies based on the undisputed fact that some Irish beef processors gave an average net meat yield of 68% per carcass in intervention, keeping the rest for themselves. The full amount was not given to the EU intervention store which was, in fact, paying for it. According to a Goodman source: "Everybody put in a report of a 68% red meat yield. But Mary Hanney pulled the decision to run as through cabinet on 6 October. That case is a waste of funds." Goodman's spokespersons indicate that their defence will be based on the claim that the Department knew all about the 68% play and co-ordinated its operations. "It also now looks as if the Department has allowed the statute of limitations to pass on the other beef processors," a spokesperson added. The Department's view is that other processors were not being sued because the case is based on the Tribunal evidence of Goodman executive Gerry Thomson about his own company. The critics say that if they had not applied political pressure, the Department would have allowed the limitations deadline to pass and Goodman



**GOODMAN**  
It can be argued that the criticism is misplaced because there are only small financial amounts outstanding between him and the Department.



**O'MALLEY**  
Has clearly relished the opportunity to pillory Departmental officials without the presence of lawyers, PR men or consultants.

**Fines irrecoverable**

On the face of it, it can be argued that the critics' emphasis on Larry Goodman is misplaced because there are only small financial

MARCH 1999

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An advert from 2000.

## An inch is a mile where Kerrymaid is made.



**Kerrymaid**

In this article from 1999, the late Des Crowley, chronicled a turbulent decade for the beef industry which was fraught with 'fines, accusations, counter-accusations, and the Beef Tribunal'. It was a 'decade of discontent' he wrote.

Kerrymaid butter spread, produced by the Kerry Group, was established in 1989 and today, comprises a range of dairy-based products and vegan alternatives such as custard, vegan cheese slices, and ice-cream mixes. In 2021, Kerry lost a legal battle with Ornuu, maker of Kerrygold, over trademarking the Kerrymaid brand in Europe (outside of Ireland and the UK).



the Department of Agriculture, as a prominent and gifted traditional Irish musician.

**Tom Collins.**

One of the new breed of CAO (Offaly) who brought a fresh and businesslike approach to the farm advice industry. A rock of uncommon sense, Tom is also an innovative leader and inspired motivator who gets things done while others are still at the talking and planning stage. I first met him as the 1970s turned into the 1980s and have since been in awe of his skills and accomplishments.

**Michael Dillon.**

At the farewell drinks in RTE for Michael on his retirement from his radio/TV career reporting on cattle prices, I thanked him for answering all my questions down through the years. His reply: "Thanks for asking them." This kindly man



Michael Dillon

who, more than anyone else, is the icon of Irish farming to the vast majority of people, never minded anyone being ignorant about the intricacies of agriculture; he did, however, resent the "chancers" among his journalistic colleagues.

**Gerry Scully.**

For his infectious enthusiasm for anything to do with sheep. I also greatly admired this Teagasc man's communication skills and his gift of being able to write simply. Not least because he sang "The Fields of Athenry" to my children as we drove through the countryside around that town on an unforgettable family holiday in the west.

**Tom Arnold.**

Former chief economist with the Department, now assistant secretary. He was responsible for publishing the Compendium of Irish Economic and Agricultural Statistics, and if ever there was a bedside book on

In 2000, the late agricultural journalist, Paddy Smith, marked 25 years of *IFM* by taking a personal look back at the preceding decades. Included in the seven-page feature, Paddy compiled a list of people he remembered from Irish agriculture. He wrote: "Some are on the list because you, the reader, may have forgotten them or never come across them. Others are simply people I would like to introduce to my friends. Among the 33 individuals selected were Mairead McGuinness, described by Paddy as 'the most exciting journalist' he had ever worked with; and the late, great Michael Dillon, a 'kindly man who [...] was an icon of Irish farming'. Also mentioned was our own Matt Ryan, 'for his communication skills as an ACOT/Teagasc dairy adviser'. And, he is still communicating and advising today, in person and on paper in *Irish Farmers Monthly's* Management Hints.

**FEATURE**

**John Malone.**

Fine came within my ken in the early 1980s when he was information officer with the Department of Agriculture. His talents eventually brought him to the very top as Secretary General in the Department, but to me he will always be a man who was able to stand back from the job and observe the greater picture in such a manner that would lead to a nice little piece for my radio slot on RTE, especially when I was stuck for a subject.

**Mairead McGuinness.**

Probably the most exciting journalist I have ever worked with. The fact that she is my boss is no reason for including her in this list – so indeed for leaving her out. Mairead's boundless energy fires me out just watching her. She has worked in radio, TV and print, bringing a unique contribution to all three mediums.



Mairead McGuinness

**Niall O Mullleoir.**

The keen and efficient press officer with the IFA before he took the top job in Fine Gael headquarters.

What I particularly enjoyed about Niall was his appreciation of all things cultural. Unlike many people with a special interest in all things Irish, including the language, his interests are much broader and more stimulating. Good company to be in.

**John M. Collins.**

This village farmer from the outskirts of Drogheda has had many strings to his bow, not least as an astute office holder with the IFA, a considerably successful author of fiction and the writer of an occasional column about his farming exploits. He has the knack of making the mundane interesting. Definitely one for introduction to my friends.

# THE PERFECT TILLAGE FARMER

For our special issue, MATT O'KEEFFE reflects on the circumstances of the perfect, but fictitious, tillage farmer.



Is there such a person as the perfect tillage farmer? Of course not, no more than any professional working in any area can be described as perfect. However, there is now an accumulated body of evidence and testimony as to the main element needed for successful tillage farming in Ireland. Perhaps this is a good time to put together an idiom of this successful farmer.

For the purposes of the exercise this farmer shall have a name, Sean Ploughman. His background is equally important. Sean is a 44 year old married man, himself and his wife Kitty have three children, two girls and a boy. There is a girl at University and the others have entered secondary school. Kitty has not worked outside of the home since the first child was born. This is now set to change. A mixture of opportunity, desire and need have



A perfect tillage farmer might own about 250 acres.

converged so that Kitty, having completed a FAS re-training programme, has resumed work as an administration assistant in a nearby business. The couple have identified the need to increase income as educational and other costs rise and Kitty's salary will be put to good use.

**The farm**

A perfect tillage farmer might own about 250 hectares. But Sean is not perfect, just successful. He owns almost 100 hectares and rents another 100. This scale has thus far allowed him to hire in another labour unit. The land is good, free

draining for the most part and the smallest unit is seven hectares. The tillage mix includes winter wheat and barley, spring barley and a substantial beet contract. Within this mix, Sean aims for the premium products. The spring barley is grown for malting to the greatest extent possible. Winter wheat is sown after beet and is contracted for seed. While Sean has a beet contract for 10 hectares he manages, by means of a system which does not exist, to grow another 10 hectares. I repeat, this subcontracting does not exist. There is no basis on which Sean



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In this unique feature, Matt O'Keeffe invented 44-year-old Sean Ploughman to explore the circumstances around the perfect - but fictitious - tillage farmer! "A perfect tillage farmer might own about 250 hectares. But Sean is not perfect, just successful," he wrote.

# Kissing pig farmers

Top marks to Pat Tuite of Teagasc in Drogheda for gaining pig farmers' attention with his acronym, KISS. Addressing the problem of having to adapt to the growing shortage of staff on pig farms in the Teagasc pig

newsletter, Pat advises making every routine task as simple as possible. Hence, KISS stands for - keep it simple, Seamus!

He makes a lot of sense in his article too, with advice such as increasing weaning age to increase weaning weights and litter size, while reducing inputs.

'Keep it simple Seamus!' Great advice there



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# FOCUS

New Holland's CR11 combine which won a gold medal for innovation at the 2023 Agritechnica Innovation Awards. Photo: courtesy New Holland.



TILLAGE  
&  
INNOVATION



Champion food grade oats growers, John and Mark Deering (front), from Morette near Emo in County Laois, won the coveted overall Tirlán Quality Grain Award for 2023. Also pictured: Tirlán chair John Murphy; Minister Martin Heydon; Tirlán director of agribusiness, Ailish Byrne; and CEO designate, Seán Molloy. Photo: Finbarr O'Rourke.

# MAKING GRAINS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

**MATT O'KEEFFE** WAS OUT AND ABOUT RECENTLY AT A NUMBER OF TILLAGE-RELATED EVENTS - TIRLÁN'S QUALITY GRAIN AWARDS AND TEAGASC'S BOORTMALT MALTING BARLEY CONFERENCE. HERE, HE REPORTS ON SOME OF THE KEY MESSAGES FROM BOTH WHICH INCLUDE POSITIVE UPDATES ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF IRISH TILLAGE FARMING, AND THE LOW CARBON FOOTPRINT OF OUR GRAINS

**Last month's Tirlán Grain Awards provided a refreshing insight into the professionalism and expertise of Irish grain growers.** The 14 individual awards alone showed the diversity of grains grown on Irish tillage farms and the focus on pursuing an added-value strategy as far as possible. The overall award winners were the Deering family from Laois, who also won an individual award for the quality of their food-grade oats crop.

## ADEQUATE MALTING SEED AVAILABLE

While there had been some pessimism around sourcing sufficient seed grain for this spring's planting season, there was reassurance on offer regarding seed availability from another venue last month. The Teagasc Boortmalt Malting Barley Conference attendees were told that there would be ample malting barley seed available for growers. There was a warning that to ensure sufficient seed for the premium malting barley crop, it would be critical to plant at optimum seed rates in good ground conditions. While there is no sign of those ground conditions materialising in the short term, it is early days yet for planting.

## SUSTAINABILITY CREDENTIALS

Both Tirlán and Teagasc events placed a lot of emphasis on the sustainability of Irish tillage farming, and novel research conducted by Teagasc for Tirlán and publicised at the Grain Awards ceremony confirmed the low carbon

footprint of Irish grain. This was referenced by John Kealy, head of grains at Tirlán: "A life cycle analysis (LCA) was developed to prove the high sustainability and consequent low carbon footprint of Irish grain. We have one of the lowest figures globally and, when straw incorporation is taken into account, the figures drop to almost net zero."

Translating those sustainability credentials into an increased monetary return for growers has yet to materialise to any significant extent, as John acknowledged: "Everybody is expecting this to be the next link in the chain. We now need to leverage these impressive sustainability credentials on behalf of growers. It is up to us in Tirlán to ensure that the carbon efficiency of our growers' produce is reflected in the prices sought from our customers, whether that is in food grains for human consumption or in feed grains destined for livestock production, or in the brewing and distilling sectors, where high-value end products are created using Irish grain as a central ingredient.

"At this stage, around 40 per cent of our grain purchases attract some level of premium pricing. We would like to increase that both in volume and in percentage terms if at all possible."

## THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Martin

Heydon, was asked the same question around translating low carbon footprint credentials into higher prices for the primary producer: "I visit boardrooms across the world where there is constant talk about sustainability and we are trying to grow existing market opportunities and develop new markets," he said. "Our high sustainability figures, ultimately, should deliver a win for Irish grain growers in terms of more premium pricing for their produce. It is all our responsibility across politicians, industry and growers to deliver on this aim."

Minister Heydon admitted the challenge associated with growing the Irish tillage acreage in current circumstances: "We lost ground last year so our very ambitious target to build to 400,000 hectares has been made harder, mainly because of poor weather conditions. However, Government hasn't been found wanting in supporting the sector through a range of initiatives and we have seen growers react positively to the likes of the Straw Incorporation Scheme. I want to see the various incentives developed further to assist in the growth of the sector."

## TOP GRAIN GROWERS

John and Ann Deering and their son Mark from Emo in Co. Laois were adjudicated as the overall Grain Award winners at the Tirlán event. Earlier in the proceedings, the Deerings claimed an individual award for their



proress in growing food-grade oats. The oats crop is just one of a range of grain crops grown on the Deering farm, including winter barley which is the mainstay of their tillage

**'DOING THE LITTLE THINGS WELL'**

Commenting on the Deering family's success at the 2024 Tirlán Quality Grain Awards, Mark Deering, said: "We focus on doing the little things well and are very thankful to our agronomist, Tim Scott (Tirlán), for his help throughout the year. It's lovely to be recognised for the work we do as a family to produce a range of quality crops in a sustainable way. We're thrilled to be going home with two wins. It makes the hard work very worthwhile and we will enjoy celebrating these wins." Crops on the family farm are established mainly by min-till and organic manures are used on some of the land. Attention to detail is a hallmark of the Deering's success in growing quality grains. The winning crop had an average specific weight of 57.8kg/ha at 17.6 per cent moisture across 214 tonnes and, incidentally, was a crop of gluten-free oats.

operation. Winter oilseed rape, spring beans and winter oats (gluten-free) all act as break-crops alongside the award-winning food grade oats. The Deering family also grows winter wheat and manages spring barley on contract locally. The production figures for the food grade oats are impressive with 57.8kg per hectolitre specific weight, harvested at 17.6 per cent moisture and delivering a total tonnage of 214 tonnes.

**ADVANCING OUR PREMIUM REPUTATION**

In attendance at the Tirlán event was Teagasc director, Frank O'Mara who reflected on Irish grain-growing standards: "Our collaboration with Tirlán in researching the sustainability of the Irish grain growing sector has proven that we are in a very strong position compared to our international competitors. In many instances, we are not far from having grain crops that are effectively carbon neutral." Frank also commented on the development, with South East Technological University of a centre of excellence for brewing and distilling research, as outlined in another article published in this issue on page XXXXXX: "The centre is based at Oakpark and was funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). The purpose is to investigate the brewing and distilling qualities

of Irish grain. We are particularly interested in the qualities of Irish grain that make them suitable for those uses. Issues such as crop husbandry or varietal differences or soil types will affect the characteristics of grain for brewing and distilling. Obviously, the whole thrust of the initiative is to get more of our grain into the higher value markets and get premium prices for a higher proportion of our grain," he said.

"The Irish drinks industry is going very well, and we have a very good reputation internationally for producing high quality products. Exports in the sector are increasing year-on-year and it represents an opportunity for our grain growers to capitalise on this growth and success. Feed grain production is very much an internationally competitive market and the margins are tight so the more we can move our growers up the value chain the better for our growers economic wellbeing. The key is to get a distinguishing feature in that premium market. It's one thing to be supplying the malting and distilling sectors. We need to be in the top end of that premium market to maximise the benefits for our grain growers. Those sustainability figures around very low carbon footprint should help to deliver that distinguishing advantage we need for our grain crops."

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**MATT O'KEEFFE** ATTENDED THE TEAGASC NATIONAL TILLAGE CONFERENCE AND WAS ENCOURAGED TO HEAR THAT THE AUTHORITY IS INTENSIFYING ITS RESEARCH INTO THE POTENTIAL OF IRISH GRAIN CROPS TO MAKE A BIGGER IMPACT ON OUR BURGEONING DISTILLING SECTOR

# PREMIUM GRAIN FOR PREMIUM PRODUCTS

As Irish whiskey, led by Jameson, continues to compete for the top spot over Scotch among global whiskey drinkers, the opportunities for Irish grain growers to supply more of the grain raw materials necessary for the distillation process seems significant. A presentation from Dr Sinead Morris of South East Technical University (SETU) and Lisa Ryan of Teagasc confirmed the commitment of Teagasc towards encouraging more substitution of imported grain for distilling with Irish grown product.

## A COLLABORATIVE EXERCISE

A current research collaboration entitled DABBING CAP is a major Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine-funded project – with Teagasc and SETU, working with TUD – aiming to produce and to process Irish wheat and novel grains such as rye, maize grain and spelt as a direct replacement for imported maize.

As part of the research, for instance, the grain characteristics that render Irish wheat suitable for Irish whiskey will be identified and confirmed. In the same way, several other Irish grains, including rye and home-grown maize, can be analysed in terms of their suitability to the Irish distilling sector.

## THE WHEAT OPTION

Wheat, in particular, has significant potential to make an impact on Irish distilling processes. As was heard at the Tillage Conference, Irish grown wheat can replace imported maize grain. It is, as has been confirmed over many years of cropping, suited to the Irish climate. It is a high-yielding crop. In fact, the Irish climate is conducive to producing among the highest wheat yields in the world, though high levels of inputs are required including crop protectants and fertilisers. In addition, we have growers who have built up great expertise in growing and managing wheat crops over many decades. Wheat has the capacity to deliver good alcohol production, which, ultimately, is the acid test of a grain's usefulness in distilling processes.

There are, as was noted by the researchers, some concerns around wheat use, as there are with many other grains, including processing issues. For example, the grain composition's impact on alcohol production and the benefits of soft versus hard wheats in the distilling process. The impact of nitrogen-fertiliser-use rates is important in maximising high starch and resulting alcohol yields. Two hundred kilogrammes per hectare is recognised as the benchmark input level that should provide

an increase in starch and a consequent alcohol increase.

## A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Scientific research comes to the fore in delivering a premium outlet for Irish-grown grain to be used in the distilling and brewing sectors. The establishment of a National Centre for Brewing and Distilling (NCBD) should create a centre of excellence for brewing and distilling in Ireland that should validate the added value potential of Irish grains for the various processes involved in alcohol production. It should provide the necessary support structures for the stakeholders involved, including education, agronomy and production, all the way through to the finished premium products. Last year saw the original concept brought to reality with a joint Teagasc-SETU strategy implemented, including the development of essential courses to provide practical and quality-control training for the sector. Hardware development is now underway with the fabrication of column still capacity. Further developments this year will include full scale analytical laboratory facilities and a sensory room for industry use. With the ongoing expansion in distillery numbers across the country, technical support is



## WHEAT HAS THE CAPACITY TO DELIVER GOOD ALCOHOL PRODUCTION, WHICH, ULTIMATELY, IS THE ACID TEST OF A GRAIN'S USEFULNESS IN DISTILLING PROCESSES

essential. To that end, the NCBD will be able to provide onsite technical support for start-ups as well as existing businesses.

### NON-ALCOHOLIC OPTIONS

There is an additional research focus with an emphasis on investigating the benefits of fermented non-alcoholic beer on human health as well as on optimising the value of the distilling residues. The latter should, again, increase the premiumisation potential of Irish grain by adding a higher residual value to the crop after the distilling and brewing processes are completed. At the same time, there will be an ongoing focus on expanding the role of Irish grain in the sector and ensuring that Irish grain growers can look forward to higher premiums for their produce. An exploration of heritage barleys to determine their malting potential is also planned.

Of significant importance among that list of research priorities is the work around non-alcoholic beverages. A report from Diageo last month confirmed the increasing popularity of these drinks, with the company that owns the iconic Guinness brand reporting that more than four per cent of the black stuff brewed at the St James's Gate Brewery in Dublin last year was non-alcoholic. That's over 50 million pints out of one billion-plus of the creamy heads brewed by Diageo in 2023. Diageo also reported that the 0.0 option among tipplers is gaining momentum with an expectation that consumer preference for the non-alcoholic option will continue to grow strongly in the years ahead. To that end, Diageo is investing €25m in new brewing facilities to deliver a 300 per cent increase in production capacity of the sober beverage. Back on tillage farms, growers may hope that a substantial proportion of the grain required for this increased production of Guinness 0.0 may be filled with Irish-grown grain.

Zero-alcohol lager consumption is also in the ascendancy, with the taste and texture now virtually indecipherable from its alcohol-laden brethren. It's not only in brewing that the increasing popularity of non-alcoholic drinks is being experienced. Non-alcoholic gin is also increasingly popular and with the huge surge in production, not only of Irish whiskey distilleries but also of gin and vodka distilling, the future for premium priced Irish grains suitable for use in these drinks looks increasingly positive.



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# CLOVER AND OUT: CALLING TIME ON CHEMICAL N

Paul Billings, managing director of Germinal UK and Ireland.

A NEW RESEARCH PROJECT THAT SEEKS TO REDUCE OR EVEN ELIMINATE THE DEPENDENCE OF GRASSLAND FARMING ON NITROGEN FERTILISERS HAS BEEN LAUNCHED. PAUL BILLINGS, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF GERMINAL UK AND IRELAND, EXPLAINED THE CONCEPTS INVOLVED TO **MATT O'KEEFFE**

The central thesis revolves around **improving clover utilisation of nitrogen (N) from the atmosphere, allied to enhanced soil microbiology**, Paul explains: "Bringing the whole package together could result in a huge reduction in the need for chemical N. We're looking for natural solutions, ones that already exist but which we can enhance and improve. We have two main aims in the project. One is to reduce and even eliminate the need for chemical nitrogen application to our grasslands and the other is to improve the efficiency by which animals graze that grassland: i.e. how much they take out of it, how much they convert the protein contained in clover-rich grassland into meat and milk protein. By doing all that you can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and maintain food production and stocking rates at current levels. Ultimately, that should reduce the cost of food production and improve farm income. So, it's a win-win for everyone."

## A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

The British government has provided a grant of €4m euro for the research with Germinal as the

lead partner in the project. Origin Enterprises and Aberystwyth University, with which Germinal has a long-standing relationship, are among the other research partners involved. The title of this research is Project NUE-Leg (Nitrogen Utilisation Efficiency-Legume).

Agriculture accounts for about one-third of Ireland's total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and ruminant livestock are a significant source of these in the forms of methane and ammonia. A near-term sectoral emissions reduction target of 25 per cent has been set for the sector.

Paul delves further into the science: "Farmers are coming under increasing pressure to reduce stocking rates. We want to try and avoid that. We know plants need nitrogen to grow and, particularly, they need it for vegetative growth, for leaf growth. Currently in grasslands, if we restrict the amount of nitrogen we apply, we reduce pasture production.

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"The air around us contains 78 per cent nitrogen. Legumes such as white clover can fix atmospheric nitrogen from fresh air to meet their nutritional requirements. They can do this because of a close relationship between the roots of legume plants and soil microbes called rhizobia. This fixed nitrogen also becomes available to meet the nutritional requirements of grass plants in the pasture."

**THERE'S NO GENE EDITING, NO GM. WE ARE SELECTING PLANTS AND RHIZOBIA FROM NATURE THAT DO THINGS BETTER AND COMBINING THE TWO TOGETHER**

#### SOIL SCIENCE

The 'NUE-Leg' Project will include testing of a new variety of white clover that has been bred by crossing with Caucasian clover, which has underground rooting stems called rhizomes, to create 'DoubleRoot' which resembles white clover but has both stolons and rhizomes and so can survive grazing, fix nitrogen, and resist drought and cold conditions. A significant aspect of the Project NUE-Leg involves improving soil microbiology, Paul says: "What we're doing is improving that process by putting better rhizobia in with the seed into the soil, ones which are more efficient and can capture more of the nitrogen. And by feeding the clover with the right nutrition packages, we again make them fix more nitrogen. Specially tailored plant nutritional formulations will be developed to support the establishment and persistence of the new legume varieties and maximise

their nitrogen fixing and animal nutritional potentials," he says.

"Currently a very good grass/clover sward, with 30 per cent clover DM content, will fix 100-150kg of nitrogen. We think we can get that up to 300kg. It's all based on conventional plant breeding. There's no gene editing, no GM. We are selecting plants and rhizobia from nature that do things better and combining the two together.

"Let's look at the red clover, which we call 'Red Runner' that grows like a white clover. White clover is a fantastic plant. It's very persistent and used in grazing and cutting swards. It grows with stolons, so it persists. Most red clovers don't have that stolon, so they die out quite quickly. We use it in silage ground for cutting. We can't really use it for grazing because it doesn't last very long. Red clovers contain an enzyme called polyphenol oxidase (PPO) that protects the protein. It slows down the speed of protein breakdown, which means the animal, when it grazes, can capture more of the protein, perhaps up to 50 per cent more from red clover than from white clover. Some naturally occurring red clover varieties do have stolons. They grow like white clover, so we can use those in our grazing swards and get the additional nutrient value of the slow-release protein in the red clover."

#### ENHANCING SOIL BIOLOGY

Paul went on to highlight the role of specific microbes in the soil: "The rhizobia in the soil, the ones we're concentrating on in this project, are extremely useful. They're in most soils apart from peaty, wet soils. There are different strains, so it's important to select the right strain to go with the right clover species and variety you're growing. Getting them in

synchrony is the whole point of this process.

"In general terms, soil microbiology is the future. I think that's where we'll be going with all our plant breeding over the next 10 to 20 years as soil knowledge improves and technologies advance. There's so much we can do underground. For many centuries, plant breeding has concentrated above ground, on leaves, on plants, on seeds and grains. But what's happening with the roots is really going to be very important in the future."

#### TIME SCALE

The benefits of the research being undertaken by Germinal with its partners, Aberystwyth University and Origin Enterprises, could come into commercial use quickly, if Paul's expectations are realised: "We are going to start this spring, sowing these clover varieties on 14 commercial farms we have signed up and they're going to be our demonstration units. Then we're going to be sowing continually on those farms and improving the technology and showing the gains we are making over the next four years. It's important that we can prove the advantages and the productivity and economic gains that we are making. Those 14 farms are dairy (both extensive and intensive), sheep farms, beef farms, upland loam farms, and will include organic and conventional farms. We've got the whole spectrum covered, because we think this can work on every type of farm. "Ireland and the UK are some of the best places in the world to produce red meat and milk. That's why we need to improve our systems and we need to keep producing grazing-based produce here because we have the climate and the soils that enable us to do it."

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# WINNOVATING

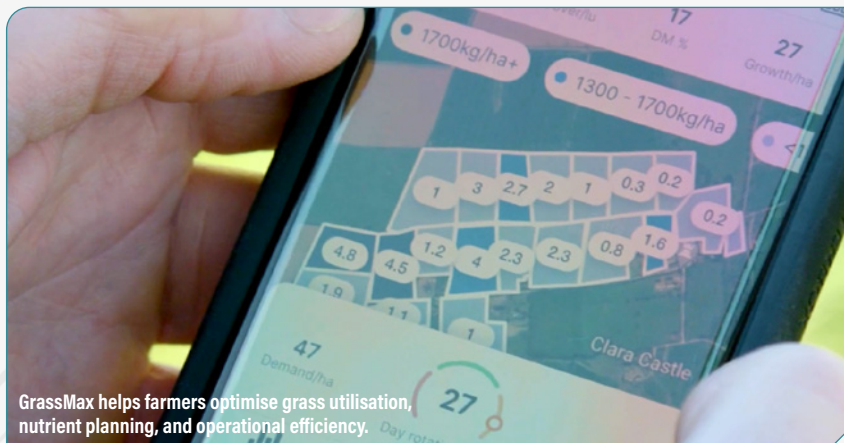
AGRICULTURE HAS COME A LONG WAY FROM THE DAYS OF JETHRO TULL AND HIS HORSE-DRAWN SEED PLOUGH AND HOE, BUT HE LAID THE FOUNDATIONS FOR AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION THAT HAS TRANSFORMED THE INDUSTRY - AND CONTINUES TO DO SO. **BERNIE COMMINS** LOOKS AT SOME OF THE IRISH INNOVATIONS THAT ARE MAKING THEIR OWN STAMP ON TODAY'S AGRICULTURAL WORLD, MAKING LIFE BETTER FOR FARMERS, AND MAKING FARMING BETTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

From the cultivation techniques of the early farmers to Tull's massive breakthrough, to the 'tech-ricultural' revolution that we are living through, there is no doubting the extent to which innovation has shaped agriculture and farming. For the last 13 years, an innovation arena and associated awards have been features of the annual National Ploughing Championships (The Ploughing) where problem solvers showcase their best inventions within the agricultural world. Technology, or agri-tech, has been a dominant theme of the awards, and, according to Ifac's Irish Farm Report 2024, traditional agricultural practices have been transformed in recent years due to technology.

While this presents challenges, according to the report - costs of implementation, greater dependency on technology, data security concerns, or skills shortages - it has brought about some great advantages. Increased efficiencies, precision agriculture, data-driven decision making, and innovative crop-monitoring solutions all bring great positives, the report highlights. It explains that technology streamlines farming processes, while GPS-guided tractors and drones, for example, allow farmers to optimise resource use and minimise waste and environmental impact. Farm-management software helps farmers to analyse data on weather patterns, soil health, and crop performance, while sensors and Internet of Things (IoT) devices help monitor crop health in real-time, detecting diseases or nutrient deficiencies.

## MEASURING GRASS FROM SPACE!

Kieran Holden is a grassland farmer and grassland digital specialist with Origin Enterprise, the company behind GrassMax, which was won the overall prize at the Enterprise Ireland Innovation Arena at The Ploughing in 2023. He says that the impetus to address environmental challenges while achieving sustainable land use and food production has brought about an exciting period of innovation and evolution within the



agricultural sector.

GrassMax is to the fore of that evolution, as it includes technology, and is described by the company as a 'world-first, cloud penetrating satellite technology that accurately measures the height of grass from space.' Yes, you read that right!

Kieran explains: "GrassMax offers ground-breaking insights for increasing farm productivity and profitability, while enabling organisations and businesses to verify sustainability practices in the livestock supply chain." The associated app can help livestock farmers optimise grass utilisation, nutrient planning, and operational efficiency.

## WHO IS ORIGIN ENTERPRISES?

Origin Enterprises plc, headquartered in Dublin, provides specialist advice, inputs, services and digital solutions to promote sustainable land use. Its origins trace back to the IAWS Group, before it was established as a standalone entity in 2006 to concentrate on its foundational agri-business and food sectors. The group holds leading market positions in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Poland and Romania. It specialises in providing agronomy expertise, inputs and related services to farmers, growers and professionals in agriculture, amenity, landscaping and ecology markets.

## EMPOWERING

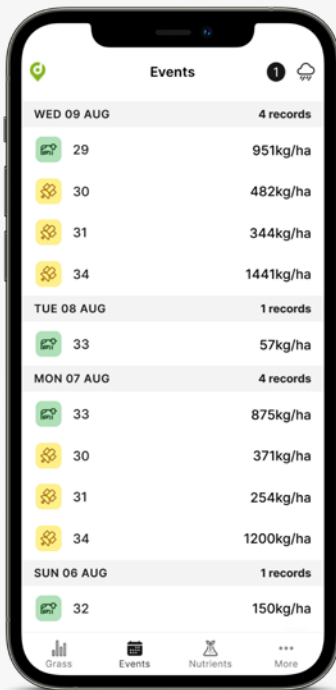
This, he says, 'empowers farmers to grow and manage grass effectively, it streamlines compliance paperwork, and aids sustainable practices.'

He explains: "For farmers, nutrient planning is essential as underapplication can result in poor grass production, reduced nitrogen use efficiency (NUE), and increased feed costs. On the other hand, over-application costs, on average, €9.50 per hectare or €760 per farm. GrassMax solves this by quickly calculating precise and compliant nutrient, slurry, and liming application plans - with shopping lists and risk-management maps - increasing NUE, facilitating sustainable farm management, and reducing costs."

With the introduction of the fertiliser register by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and changes to the Nitrates Action Plan, farmers are increasingly aware of the nutrient allowance. "GrassMax provides them with a simple and accurate calculator of nutrient allowances. We also have a fertiliser-spreading plan that takes farm-produced manures into account. It follows the four Rs approach of ensuring the plan is tailored to the right product: the right rate; the right location; and the right time. This also includes a lime spreading and soil sampling plan."

Grass utilisation accounts for 44 per cent of the variation in net profit per hectare on





Simple and accurate calculations are available via your mobile phone.

dairy farms, and in Ireland, every additional tonne of grass utilised per hectare translates to €256 in profit, says Kieran. "Integrating automated grass measurement data thanks to cloud penetrating satellite technology gives GrassMax even more power to help farmers optimise their grass use, with even a half tonne per hectare increase in utilisation equating to a €10,000 increase in profitability on an 80-hectare farm." In addition, the product help farmers save valued time: "With satellite remote-sensed grass covers every week and predicted grass covers daily, GrassMax also saves around two hours per week on manual measurement. It is quick and simple for farmers to set up, with user-friendly tools for monitoring grass growth, implementing rotational grazing, and extending days at grass."

### WELL RECEIVED

Based on all the above, it is hardly surprising that GrassMax has piqued farmers' interest and there are currently 50 demo farms across Ireland using GrassMax and providing feedback to Kieran and his team. "Our focus is on rigorously testing the product before its wider commercial release to ensure a positive experience for farmers," he explains. "The response from farmers has been encouraging. Given the uncertainty surrounding the fertiliser database, they've expressed appreciation for tools that aid in fertiliser planning. It's been well-received for its ability to provide farmers with a

## WITH SATELLITE REMOTE-SENSED GRASS COVERS EVERY WEEK AND PREDICTED GRASS COVERS DAILY, GRASSMAX ALSO SAVES AROUND TWO HOURS PER WEEK ON MANUAL MEASUREMENT

comprehensive shopping list, simplifying compliance complexities and allowing them to focus on soil nutrition." The satellite grass-measurement function seems to be particularly appealing, for obvious reasons: "With busy schedules, particularly in spring when they are busy in calving sheds and around the yard, the convenience of receiving measurements directly on their phones rather than walking the farm has generated a lot of enthusiasm," says Kieran.

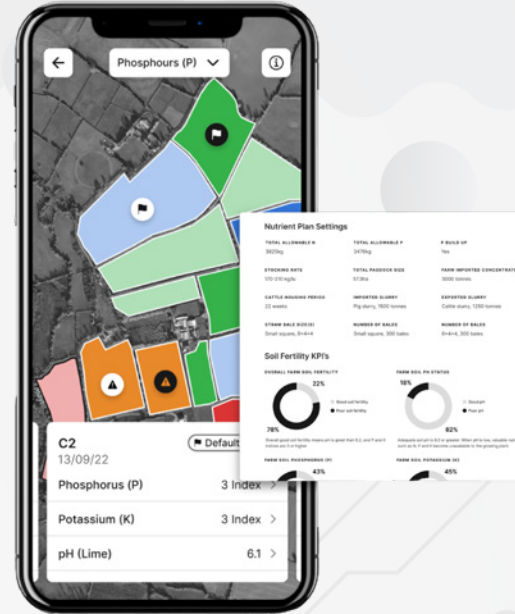
### ENVIRONMENT

A review of soil samples from dairy farms in 2022 by Teagasc showed that optimum soil fertility was just 20 per cent in total. Soil with optimum fertility on tillage farms was 19 per cent, while soil fertility on drystock farms at just 13 per cent. GrassMax's fertiliser plan, based on the four Rs principle, addresses this issue. "This not only optimises soil fertility but also reduces nutrient loss to the environment, contributing to environmental sustainability," explains Kieran. Additionally, GrassMax supplies a lime plan tailored to each farm; with lime raising the pH balance in soils, it can reduce dependency on imported fertilisers and ensure the persistency of clover plants.

"By providing precise grass cover measurements, GrassMax aids farmers in grazing grass at the optimal stage of 1,400kg DM/ha rather than after an extra five days of growth 2,000kg DM/ha, which results in a 15 per cent reduction of greenhouse gases. This targeted approach minimises the environmental impact while maximising productivity, explains Kieran. Additionally, time-, labour-, and cost-saving features of GrassMax also contribute to social and economic sustainability, enabling farmers to operate more efficiently and effectively.

### FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY

Not surprisingly, Kieran says that the company's future plans centre around 'consistent science-led innovation and improved use of technology, and staying attuned to the needs of farmers with



The company is currently focusing on enhancing GrassMax's nutrient management planning offering.

sustainability at the core." "We are focusing on a holistic approach to improved NUE, soil resilience and integrated pest management, supported by world-leading digital innovation. This means we continue to invest in the development of digital agronomy tools to support efficiencies for future growth. "As part of that, we are evolving our portfolio of products and services to enable our customers to optimise land yields sustainably with specific focus on bio-solutions, specialty nutrition technologies and digital technologies." Currently, within GrassMax, the company is focusing on enhancing its nutrient management planning offering.

### ON WINNING THE TOP PRIZE AT THE ENTERPRISE IRELAND INNOVATION ARENA

Kieran says: "It signified not only recognition from industry experts and peers but also validated the innovative nature and potential commercial and environmental impact of GrassMax technology. It was great to be surrounded by other Innovation Arena award winners and many talented entrepreneurs, focused on shaping the future of agriculture. It shows the leading role Ireland can play in agri-tech innovation globally and help develop more efficient and sustainable food production systems which protect our environment."

### WHAT IS LIVEFARM?

Livefarm is a digital platform designed to enhance soil health management. It equips users with tools for efficient soil data collection, analysis, sharing and fostering data-driven decisions for better soil health, productivity, and sustainable farming.

### HEART AND SOIL

Tull wrote in his Essay on the Principles of Vegetation and Tillage: 'Cattle feed on vegetables that grow upon the earth's external surface. But vegetables themselves first receive, from within the Earth, the nourishment they give to animals.' He understood the significance of the soil and its composition, and so too does Livefarm, which scooped the 2023 Ifac Best Newcomer award at the Enterprise Ireland Innovation Arena at The Ploughing.

This digital platform was designed to enhance soil health management and it equips users with tools for efficient soil data collection, analysis, sharing and fostering data-driven decisions for better soil health, productivity, and sustainable farming. Its managing director, Mark Connolly, explained the origins of the company, which was established in 2020 but stretches back much further: "Following my graduation with a BSc in Applied Physics from Dublin City University in 2008, I embarked on a career in geophysics

## OUR AIM IS TO EQUIP FARMERS WITH ADVANCED TOOLS FOR MORE EFFICIENT AND SUSTAINABLE FARM MANAGEMENT

within the oil and gas sector. This journey led me to emigrate to Norway in 2010, where I worked in senior management roles in the geophysical services sector working on projects spanning the globe. More recently I became involved in establishing several startups in this space."

### AGRI-TECH TRANSITION

Transitioning to agri-tech in Ireland wasn't an obvious move for Mark but his upbringing on a farm in Co. Wicklow instilled a deep

connection to agriculture and the call of his farming roots remained strong, he says. In addition, he had also observed the untapped potential within Irish agri-tech. Motivated by this and a want to help farmers use technology to navigate increased global competition and environmental sustainability challenges, Mark returned to Ireland in 2018 with the aim of leveraging his experiences and skills to contribute to the agricultural sector's advancement.

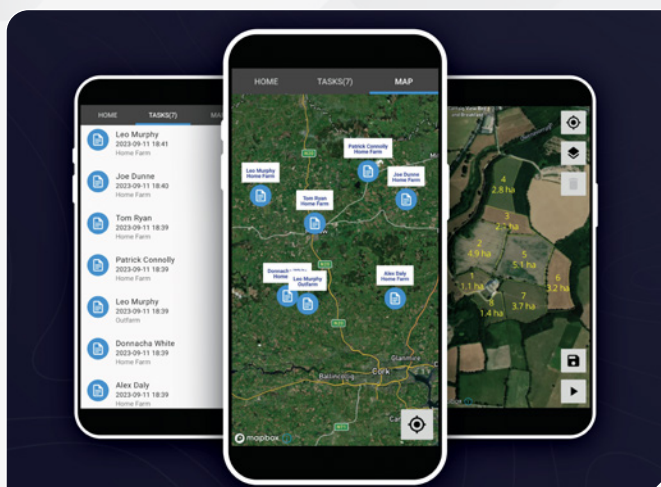
"The company has undergone a significant evolution since its inception," Mark explains. "Initially conceived around remote and proximal soil sensing technologies, the focus shifted towards addressing more immediate needs within traditional soil sampling. Recognising the gap between laboratory standards and on-the-ground sampling practices, we redirected our efforts towards the practicalities of standardisation and the adoption of automated sampling methods," he says.

### NEW SOLUTIONS NEEDED

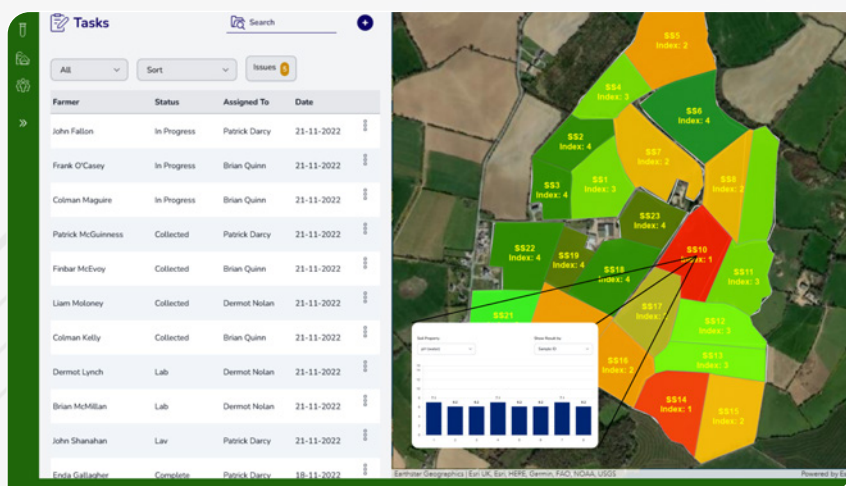
But, Mark says, it quickly became evident that

existing software and technology solutions on the market were inadequate for facilitating efficient soil sample collection, digital mapping, and data management, particularly in the context of Irish farming practices and off-the-shelf enterprise solutions fell short of meeting the user-friendly standards necessary for Irish farmers. "So, while initially, we had not planned on developing our own software solution as we delved deeper into the industry's needs, it became increasingly clear that a tailored solution was essential," says Mark. And, three years ago, the company took a digital pivot with the development of Livefarm. Mark explains that since then it has been in 'stealth mode' prioritising understanding the industry and gaining an appreciation for the needs and requirements of the sector. "While our core team remains small, we have forged partnerships with major Irish agri-businesses and are working on projects nationally."

While there are many features of the Livefarm platform, Mark takes us through the top three that are the most impactful: record keeping and reporting; task management; and the



The digital platform offers tools for efficient soil data collection, analysis and sharing.



Task management tools help to monitor progress.



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The record-keeping functionality allows for meticulous documentation of all farm activities and soil health data, integrated with advanced reporting capabilities. "This not only simplifies the storage and retrieval of critical farm data but also supports the generation of detailed, actionable reports. These reports can be easily shared and collaborated on with advisors, stakeholders, and team members, fostering a more connected and informed farming operation, where data-driven decisions lead to improved efficiency and productivity," says Mark. Task management within Livefarm significantly enhances the ability of agricultural advisors and businesses to manage on-farm data collection efficiently. "It's particularly beneficial for advisors who manage multiple farms or large areas, as it facilitates the scheduling and monitoring of soil sampling, inspections, and other critical tasks," Mark says.

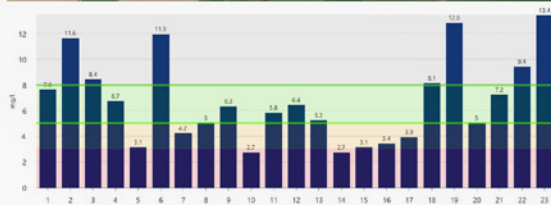
The mobile app, Scout+, he says is designed for simplified on-farm data collection. "It facilitates GPS-based soil sampling, task management, and instant record-keeping, directly from the field. It empowers farmers and agricultural advisors with real-time data access and operational control, enhancing the efficiency of farm management practices." This significantly reduces the need for manual paperwork, for example, through its integration with laboratories, which streamlines the workflow of agricultural professionals, making on-the-go decision-making more informed and effective.

### CORE USERS

Livefarm's core users, so far, are agri-businesses and advisors, says Mark, who have 'warmly welcomed' the product. "They leverage our platform to bolster their operations and better serve their clients, appreciating its efficiency in streamlining soil management tasks. Features like GPS soil sampling, automated lab integration, and comprehensive reporting have notably lessened administrative loads and enhanced decision-making capabilities.

"There's also a growing enthusiasm among individual farmers for tools like Livefarm, indicating a substantial demand for innovative solutions that facilitate sustainable farming and informed agricultural decision-making."

But how does it 'facilitate sustainable farming'? Mark says it helps farmers operate in a more environmentally friendly manner. He



Reports can be generated automatically for sharing with advisors and farmers.

explains: "By enabling precise soil sampling and analysis, farmers can understand the exact nutrient needs of their soil. This leads to more targeted fertiliser application, reducing overuse and preventing nutrient runoff into waterways, which is a major environmental concern.

"The platform's data-driven approach promotes sustainable soil management practices, helping farmers enhance soil health while minimising their environmental footprint. This contributes to more sustainable agriculture by ensuring that soil resources are used efficiently and responsibly."

### GROWTH AND CHANGE

In the short time that Livefarm has been operational, Mark says he has seen tremendous growth and change in the agricultural sector, which is undergoing a remarkable phase of innovation. "This is good news for the farmer in terms of choice and availability of technology as well as for innovators such as us as there is increasing awareness among farmers of the pivotal role technology can play on their farms which is helping to drive on-farm tech adoption." And that means further growth for the company, he says: "We will be focusing on expanding the platform's capabilities to include broader on-farm geospatial data collection, digital agronomy, and decision-support tools. Key future developments include enhancing

predictive analytics for soil health, increasing third-party integrations, and improving the user experience to facilitate wider adoption of precision agriculture.

"Our aim is to equip farmers with advanced tools for more efficient and sustainable farm management, driving the advancement of smart farming technologies. We will also be working to strengthen further the relationships we have built within the industry over the last few years." Tull would be suitably impressed at just how far innovation has taken agriculture but with so much change happening so fast to meet the ever-increasing demands in the sector, it almost feels like we are still scratching the surface! Exciting times to come.

### ON WINNING BEST NEWCOMER AWARD

Mark says: "This was a significant milestone for Livefarm. The recognition from such a prestigious event amplifies our visibility within the agricultural sector, and we are deeply thankful for the support from Ifac, Enterprise Ireland, and the local enterprise office in Wicklow, which has been instrumental in our journey. Winning this award reinvigorates our commitment to delivering adaptive, forward-thinking solutions to the agriculture industry."

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**FOLLOWING RESEARCH INTO THE MENTAL HEALTH OF IRISH FARMERS - WHICH INVESTIGATED THE RISK FACTORS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE IN 2022 - UCD SCHOOL OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SCIENCE, IN COLLABORATION WITH UCD'S SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY, IS WORKING TO DEVELOP TRAINING PROGRAMMES TO PROMOTE FARMER HEALTH.**

Alarming results of a UCD survey conducted in 2022 revealed that 23.4 per cent of surveyed farmers were considered at risk for suicide and over half of the surveyed farmers stated that they were experiencing moderate to extremely severe depression.

#### **THE FARMING MINDS**

The research has prompted the development of a new programme, kicking off in the coming weeks, which focuses on training relevant groups in addressing farmer mental health issues. Dr Tomás Russell, Assistant Professor of Agricultural Extension and Innovation at UCD, explains: "The Farming Minds initiative is a collaboration between Agricultural Science and Psychology at University College Dublin 'UCD Agri Mental Health Group' interdisciplinary team and South-East Technical University and HSE-funded 'On Feirm Ground' farmer health training programme to promote farmer health. Recent research by the team at UCD showed that almost 40 per cent of Irish farmers were experiencing moderate to extremely severe anxiety and stress. Farmers identified (i) government policies designed

to reduce climate change, (ii) outsiders not understanding farming, and (iii) concern over the future of the farm as the key stressors. The findings highlighted the importance of mental health initiatives and suicide awareness for the farming community and that farmers prefer experiential, group-based interventions delivered by experts in psychology who are also familiar with the nature of farming."

#### TAILORED PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

In an effort to address these challenges, UCD is looking to develop interventions to support farmers with skills that build resilience to help them cope with farm stress and uncertainty. "Experts in mental health need to be involved in the development and delivery of these interventions," says Tomás. "Tailored culturally sensitive interventions to support farmers' mental health are necessary. The current proposal aims to develop and test the feasibility and effectiveness of a scalable psychological intervention for farmers to target the key areas (i.e., mental health, stress, resilience) in terms of prevention and early intervention. In collaboration with and building on the existing framework of On Feirm Ground with farmer health, we aim to develop evidence-based interventions

that go beyond signposting to support the development of key psychological skills."

#### TRAINING

As part of this unique collaboration, UCD is recruiting a team of post doctorate researchers and research assistants to develop and test these psychological interventions for farmers that are tailored for this group. Examining these psychological interventions represents the first half of the project, while the second half focuses on providing training for those working with farmers – from agricultural scientists to clinical psychologists – so that they can offer a specific set of supports if needed. "Farmers need to be dealt with as a specific group. Lots of organisations are contacting us for advice in relation to how to help farmers. We want to create an evidence-based programme for farmers in Ireland today, based on what is called 'acceptance commitment therapy'. There is a similar programme in Australia framed around this therapy, which has had good results, and we are in contact with them on this as well."

Referring to the importance of this work, Tomas states: "It is always important to say that farming is an excellent and

rewarding career, which is enjoyable for many and has lots of advantages. But we have to acknowledge that some farmers are struggling for various reasons and the research has shown this. Farming comes with its own set of challenges, unique to agriculture. We want to make sure that there are supports there for our farmers. To date, there hasn't been a tailored support service for farmers."

Meanwhile, a replication of the 2022 farmer survey is being launched to review the current position and see if anything has changed since the last one.

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Denis Drennan  
President ICMSA

# ICMSA

## THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW – THE ‘END OF THE TETHER’?

The vote of the European Parliament on February 27 in favour of the Nature Restoration Law (NRL) is the culmination of a long process that was temporarily halted last June when – to the delight of farmers across the EU – the European Parliament’s Environment Committee denied the proposed Nature Restoration Law the majority it required to proceed to a vote in the Parliament. At the time, all the usual suspects cropped up on all their usual media pulpits to denounce that decision as a practically incomprehensible act of environmental vandalism. It was nothing of the sort. It was a last ‘touch on the brakes’ by politicians worried by the lack of any workable balance between the individual rights of property owners and the diktat of the State and, by extension, the Commission. But that’s all it was – a touch on the brakes – and the supporters of the NRL just redoubled their efforts to get it passed, which it was on Tuesday February 27.

What’s worth noting is the sentiments expressed by Junior Minister of State, Malcolm Noonan, in the Irish Independent published the previous day (February 26). In an extensive article dealing with the prospects of the Bill passing, the Junior Minister explained that whatever the result in the European Parliament the next day, the Irish Government was going ahead anyway.

‘He said that even if the law is not passed at EU level, plans will continue in Ireland and work is underway to create a restoration plan for Ireland, with the aim of bringing it into effect by 2026.’

Irish farmers are wearily familiar with this practice generally known as “Heads I win, Tails you lose”. We can now expect a law that hands Member States the legal means to order landowners to restore decisive portions of their property to the unproductive state in which decades-old maps had them classified.

The law will enable the Irish State to write to a farmer whose parents and grandparents had – through back-breaking physical labour – drained the last few vital acres that made a holding productive enough to support the family, and simply inform him or her that according to map records of 1900 or 1950, or whenever, that these acres had once been ‘woodland’ and that they must be returned to that state forthwith.

That’s a very serious matter, going, as it does, to the very heart of the State’s attitude to individual’s property, as well as the future of the thousands of holdings made unviable at a stroke by the loss of these productive portions and their capacity.

That’s not to say that there aren’t any laughs to be derived from all this. How else could we describe the interventions of those gigantic multinational food corporations in support of the NRL? The idea that these corporations care a jot about disappearing biodiversity is laugh-out-loud stuff and their real attitude can be gauged by their relentless year-on-year decrease in the margins they allow us, the farmers. The coalition in favour of the NRL is thus unlikely but revealing; we see some of the most coldly calculating corporations on the planet teamed-up with assorted extreme environmentalists. They have nothing in common except a determination to end traditional farming – the corporations in the hope of introducing synthetic ‘lap-to-lip’ replacements and the environmentalists out of ideology.

Last summer, and in the wake of the defeat of the NRL at Committee level, Minister Ryan complained of “scaremongering” by opponents (he possibly meant ICMSA) about the likely effects of the NRL. At the time, ICMSA pointed out to the Minister something that bears repeating today and which he would do well to understand: the onus to

explain how the proposed law would be put into effect in Ireland was squarely on him and his colleagues. They were, and still are, demonstrably unable to come forward with a coherent account and ICMSA’s lack of confidence in the degree of planning and foresight being demonstrated by supporters of the NRL was evidently shared by An Taoiseach, who was widely reported to have stated that the law went too far. Again, this is worth repeating: it is manifestly not up to ICMSA or any other farmers to cut through the obfuscation and ‘shure it’ll be grand’ vague assurances. We are way past that at this stage. It’s up to Minister Ryan and the those supporting the law to work every conceivable situation through to a satisfactory answer – and to have those answers in advance of anything resembling a State order to ‘restore’ such much as a square yard of farmland. We must confess that after nearly 75 years of dealing with Irish Governments of every hue that we must insist on more binding commitments than once we did. As ICMSA understands it there is zero budget allocated to the NRL: not a cent. So, we are looking at a situation where the Irish State might be writing to Farmer X in County Anywhere and telling him or her that the State is in possession of maps that show that his or her 10 best acres were once a woodland or marsh or whatever and that he or she is to restore them to that condition by, say, 2030. Imagine getting one of those letters and imagine if you had previous experience of the Irish State designations of SACs and SPAs – and how that had worked out?

ICMSA has been saying for some years now that farmers were getting to the end of their tether. The Nature Restoration Law is the end of that tether.

**Denis Drennan, President, ICMSA**





Dr Mj Doran  
Intouch feeding specialist (southeast)

AS OF NOW, MOST SPRING-CALVING COWS WILL HAVE CALVED DOWN. THE SWITCH IN FOCUS FOR FARMERS WILL TURN TO ENSURING THAT HERDS HIT PEAK MILK SOLIDS YIELD. THIS PARAMETER IS A KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR ON MANY DAIRY FARMS AND IS A FUNCTION OF MILK YIELD AND MILK SOLIDS CONCENTRATION, WRITES DR MJ DORAN, INTOUCH FEEDING SPECIALIST AT ALLTECH

# UNLOCKING GENETIC POTENTIAL

In early lactation, milk yield and lactose concentration are on a natural upward trajectory. However, appropriate nutrition will dictate whether a cow reaches her full genetic potential for peak milk production. From calving up to now, milk fat and protein concentrations will have remained quite high. However, from now until the end of May, most spring milk producers' milk solids concentrations will decrease, representing potential challenges.

Typically, milk protein concentration will now start to decrease. In early lactation, the primary factor for a decrease in this component is negative energy balance (NEB). This is due to the milk yield potential of dairy cows having increased, while the cows' ability to consume sufficient feed to support this extra milk has not increased at the same rate (Figure 1). In the context of early lactation, it's not the actual component percentage that's important; the rate of decrease is more important. The same can be said for butterfat content, though different physiological functions will be responsible for a drop in this component.

Butterfat is the most variable component in cows' milk and will generally start to decrease from April onwards, typically coinciding with the onset of the second

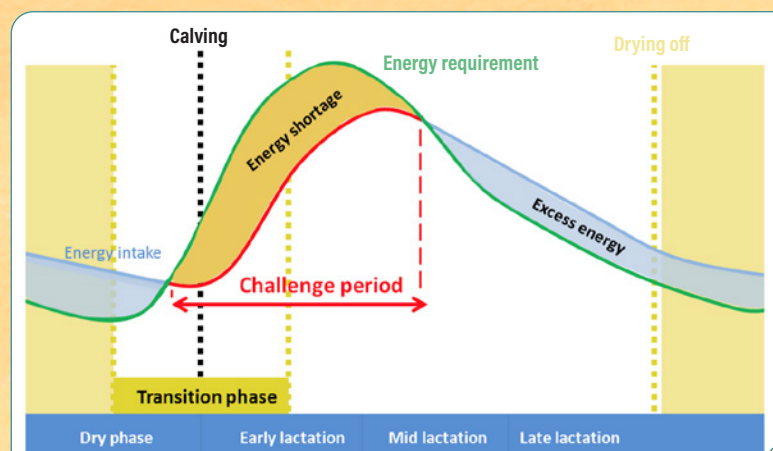


Figure 1. Energy balance of a dairy cow across lactation stages (Shaumann, 2015).

grazing rotation. This trend is due to high oil levels in the pasture, or to be more specific, polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) like conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). Once a cow consumes this oil-rich pasture, a physiological process known as biohydrogenation occurs. The aforementioned oil type is toxic to rumen bacteria; however, the rumen converts this oil into a usable dietary fat source. This process is completed at the expense of milk fat production. In context, 2g of CLA in the rumen can reduce milk fat production by 20 per cent (or from 4 per cent to 3.2 per cent),

demonstrating the sensitivity of the rumen to this oil.

It is also worth noting that milk fat content is directly correlated with ruminal pH (Figure 2). As ruminal pH decreases, so will milk fat. The high dietary oil level creates a more acidic rumen environment. This can also lead to issues related to fibre digestion and sub-acute ruminal acidosis. Rumen function is impaired in the above scenario, and many nutrients are excreted still undigested. Signs of poor rumen health include little time spent chewing the cud, loose and bubbly manure, and poor rumen fill score.

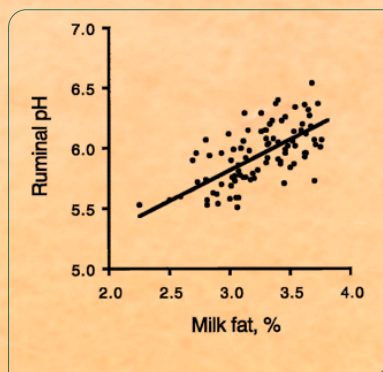


Figure 2. Relationship between milk fat and ruminal pH.

There are four key pillars to tackling the aforementioned issues:

- ▶ Nutrition;
- ▶ Ruminal health;
- ▶ Grassland management; and
- ▶ Genetics.

## NUTRITION

In the first six weeks of lactation, nutrition is critical to optimum health and 305-day milk production performance. One of the most important factors determining energy balance is dry matter intake (DMI), and this will also influence the rate of body condition score (BCS) loss. The aim is to avoid a loss in BCS of more than 0.5 units from calving to breeding (equating to 25kg body weight on average). For example, if a cow calves down at a BCS of 3, that cow should be at no less than a BCS of 2.5 when being served. If the rate of BCS loss is greater than the above, this can indicate insufficient DMI. Farm nutritionists may use a simple calculation to determine DMI potential in kilogrammes: peak milk yield (L)/1.5. ie. 27 L/1.5 = 18 kg DMI.

Unfortunately, ensuring sufficient feed quantity alone will not guarantee good levels of milk solids. The quality of nutrients present is important. Starch and sugar levels will influence milk protein concentration. Good sources of starch include concentrate feed and maize silage, whilst fodder beet and grazed grass are excellent sugar sources. A milking cow diet should be composed of 20% starch and sugar. A local farm nutritionist should be able to advise on the best way of

achieving this.

'March many weathers' is an old saying that is certainly accurate for Irish weather. Therefore, the starch and sugar content should be maintained if cows have to be brought inside for a period due to inclement weather. Butterfat will be influenced by fibre quantity and quality. Where cows graze lush pasture, a reduction in milk fat can be counteracted by offering long fibre in the form of straw and/or grass silage. Alternatively, fibre sources like soya hulls and beet pulp can be integrated into the parlour nut.

## RUMEN HEALTH

An earlier paragraph details how lush, second-rotation spring grass can impact rumen health and milk fat synthesis of the cow. These issues related to rumen health can be corrected or prevented without impairing milk production. Maintaining dietary fibre levels and making gradual dietary changes will aid in maintaining rumen health. For the rumen to work efficiently, it needs a completely anaerobic environment. Where cows consume lush spring pasture, this is not always the case. Integrating a scientifically proven yeast (like Yea-Sacc) into the total mixed ration or parlour nut can ensure an anaerobic environment in the rumen, which in turn, will help to increase fibre digestion. Using a live yeast can increase milk solids by 6 per cent and reduce the time during a 24-hour period that ruminal pH spends in an acidic state (<pH 6), as demonstrated in a University College Dublin grazing study (Figure 3).

## GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

Grassland management is another key pillar to achieving good milk solids production over the course of lactation. Cows should graze out to 4cm during the first grazing rotation. This will ensure an excellent-quality feed source for the second grazing rotation, which should maximise milk yield and protein concentration. However, attention should also be paid to rumen health and milk butterfat content. A parlour nut with Yea-Sacc included will supply adequate minerals to the cow and ensure good rumen health and optimal milk solids production. The parlour nut

recommended feed rate should be adhered to if there are no other forms of dietary mineral, as this will ensure that the cow receives the full rate of necessary minerals.

From here, a decision can be made on grass allocation amount. The key to allocating grass is to regularly complete grass measurements. Measuring will enable us to work out the area required to adequately feed a herd of cows over 24 hours. For example, if the parlour nut is to be fed at 4kg fresh weight/head (3.5 kg dry matter), this requires an allocation of 14.5kg DMI minimum for a herd peaking at 27 L and 18 kg DMI.

Other grassland management tips include:

- ▶ Follow cows with fertiliser as opposed to blanket spreading;
- ▶ Graze paddocks out when pre-grazing yield is 1,300-1,500kg dry matter per hectare; and
- ▶ Protect regrowth in large fields with the use of a back fence.

All of the above will help to keep grass oil levels to a minimum, benefitting milk fat production.

## GENETICS

Lastly, a herd's genetic make-up will also determine the level to which milk solids will drop in the spring and early summer. Some farmers who chase high levels of milk yield in a herd may experience lower levels of fat and protein concentrations than seen in other herds. This issue can be corrected through breeding decisions, and a 5- to 10-year breeding plan should be implemented to rectify any production issues. A qualified bull advisor should aid with this.

In summary, a herd may have great genetic potential for milk solids on paper, but this does not guarantee good milk solids in reality; appropriate nutrition is key to unlocking that genetic potential.

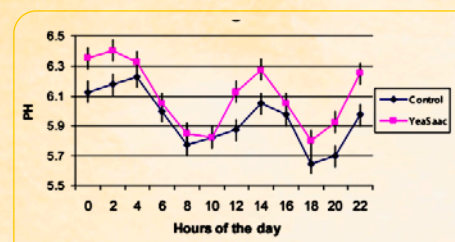


Figure 3. Effect of Yea-Sacc supplementation on ruminal pH ( $p < 0.01$ ).



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## MESSAGES

- Adjust your March grazing management to ensure adequate grass in second rotation.
- Grass won't grow without nitrogen (N) – stick with the rules and discount slurry.
- Working 85.5 hours per week – the consequence!
- 'Great to see the calf pen full of whiteheads' – use sexed dairy semen!
- Adopt Hertzberg's motivators to ensure happy, productive staff.
- Bulling heifers are in a key period of management now.



By Matt Ryan

### ADJUST MARCH GRASS MANAGEMENT!

- » February was a bit of a grazing disaster. A very wet month has resulted in a very low proportion of the milking platform being grazed on most farms. The consequences will make for challenging grazing management for the remainder of the year:
  - The target is to have 30% of the milking platform (MP) grazed by March 1 and 60% grazed by March 17.
  - The amount of grass available in the second rotation will be a serious issue because the length of time from first grazing to 'would-be' second grazing will be too short – it needs to be 55-60 days – that's why those two grazing-date targets are so critical.
  - For every 1% a farm is below the 30% March 1 target, there will be 14kg DM/ha less grass in April over the whole farm. Grazing off old grass stimulates growth; therefore, you grow more grass.
  - The first rotation is likely to end later than usual, thereby reducing the number of grazings in the year and consequently overall yield.
- » From now, farmers must be very proactive in achieving target covers on the key dates. The following is standard advice:
  - Every chance you get you must graze larger areas of ground than previously planned.
  - Ground conditions may seem poor but it is only by walking fields yourself will you really know.
  - The early grazed (February) paddocks need 60 days to recover (this year they will only have less than 50 days).
  - The March paddocks will have 30-35 days before the next grazing and they need that.
- » If you have not achieved the March 1 percentages grazed, decide on how you can rectify things? Some or all of the following options must be considered:
  - Graze off light covers so that you can graze some areas faster, because it takes longer to graze high covers.
  - Let cows out full-time. Only feed 1-2kg meal and definitely no silage for a few weeks in early March so as to graze more area.
  - Keep the meal for feeding in late March/early April because there is a strong possibility that grass will be tight in April.
  - Let out dry cows or bulling heifers to bring you to the 60+% target by mid-March – may seem drastic but in some situations, it may be necessary even with the first listed solutions.
- » The first rotation should end between April 1-15 (later date on wet farms or northern farms).
- » You will not run out of grass if you follow the spring rotation planner.
  - This is a fantastic tool to manage grass in springtime.
  - It's available on PastureBase or through your adviser.
- » As you only give a certain proportion (specific area) of the farm

each day regardless of the amount of grass on it, you have to read the signs so as to make the correct decisions:

- If there is a lot of grass on that area and cows are not grazing it out well, let cows out full-time, reduce the meals – don't be afraid to only feed 1kg/day.
- If they are 'skinning' the area and look empty or discontented, you must increase the meals or feed some high-quality silage as a last resort for a few days.
- » Cows must be brought in off the field after 2-2.5 hours' grazing.
  - If out longer, even on fine days on dry land, they will be walking around, eating very little and poaching the land – one of the big reasons for poor grass yields.
- » Cows, when eating more than 8kg DM/hd/day, should be out twice per day.
  - Plan the day as follows: At 7am, milk and feed 1-2kg meal, let them out for two hours, bring them in at 11.30am-12pm, and leave them in cubicle shed with no feed, milk again at 2pm with 1-2kg meal, leave out on grass from 4-6pm, bring into cubicle shed for the remainder of night with a small amount of silage available.
  - If doing on-off grazing, all cows must be let out at same time (don't let out directly from milking) otherwise some cows, particularly heifers and shy feeders will not be able to eat enough.
- » If we get rain, uncommitted grass-grazing farmers will think grass can't be grazed until April.
  - After all the rain in mid-February ground conditions will be difficult, therefore, fields with good grass covers dry out fast with a few fine days.
  - Pick the driest field and start now.
  - Alternatively, graze the front of paddocks, off the roadway.
  - Using the spring planner there is a weekly target area to be grazed, this can be achieved by grazing for two hours every day, if weather is fine, or it can be grazed by leaving cows out full-time for three to four fine days per week and not letting them out at all when wet.
- » A quick reminder of the important grazing techniques necessary in wet weather.
  - You can't afford serious poaching (you must do everything to avoid) because it results in soil compaction which results in poor grass yields for the remainder of the year.
  - Feed no silage where you have high grass covers.
  - Go for grass and meals only – adequate grass on its own will sustain 25-27L/cow/day.
  - This puts a 'sharpness' to their appetites when they go to grass in the morning at 11am.
  - Grazing from the back of paddocks either using cow walks or

walking over the 'good' grass is vitally important (a practice not used often enough).

- Let cows into paddocks through several entrances.
  - Regrowths and grazed ground must be protected at all costs from animals walking back over it.
  - Under no circumstances should you leave animals on paddocks when it is raining as they do nothing more than walking (most Irish farmers ignore this advice).
  - It may come as a surprise but some farmers are on average farm covers (AFCs) of 650kg/ha-850kg/ha. Why? You may ask. Simple. They closed last autumn with very low covers. What to do now to have adequate grass in April?
  - Because grazing stimulates grass to grow it is essential to have 35+% and 65% grazed by March 1 and March 15, respectively.
  - Ok, you will then have to slow down, probably grazing only once per day for two to three hours, feeding 4-5kg meal and silage.
- » **No question about it, silage ground on milking platform (MP) should be grazed twice on most farms before closing for silage, except very wet or late grass growing farms.**
- The silage yield will only be slightly reduced but this can be made up by delaying cutting by two to three days.
  - But more grass will have grown on a grazed silage field by the end of June than on a non-grazed silage field.
  - First-cut silage quality will be two to three DMD units higher and will be easier to preserve.

#### GRASS WON'T GROW WITHOUT NITROGEN!

- » Firstly, it is a waste of money using N to grow grass on farms deficient in lime, potassium (P) or phosphorous (K), and using N at the wrong times. The result is they are not growing as much grass as they need or are capable of growing.
- » For 2024, establish your stocking rate (organic nitrogen) and stay within recommended nitrogen limits:
- At minimum, put on the recommended N quantities by the end of March – 60-70 units/acre including slurry.
  - As many farmers have very little N applied this year, you can see that by March 17 heavily stocked farms should have had 65-70 units/acre applied. If not, you will be short of grass in April.
- » **Protected urea must be the product of choice all year. Research at Teagasc, Johnstown Castle 2015-2021, has shown:**
- Fields on no N grow 60% less grass.
  - Protected urea grew 13% more grass than urea (except 2018 – a drought year).
  - CAN grew 9% more grass than urea,

- » **Once per month spreading must be practised because it is the only way you can justify and apply the lower recommended application rates.**
- It works very well.
    - Small reduction in grass yield (less than 3% in May/June).
  - Saves labour, no confusion over which paddocks got N the last day you spread.
  - We must maximise the nutrients in slurry.
  - Slurry must go on soils that are low in P and K – not constantly spread on MP (we will never improve water quality if we keep doing that!)
    - Contractors are now equipped to carry 20-30,000 gallons of slurry and spread on out-farms with the umbilical system at a small extra cost.
    - Spread 2,000-2,500 gallons/acre post-grazing in March and empty tanks in late March/April onto silage ground.
    - This approach will reduce N requirements.
  - Low stocked farms need no bagged N on grazing area when 3,000 gallons slurry per acre is applied in March. Save €€.
  - Silage fields should get 2,500 gallons of slurry and 70 units of protected urea per acres.
  - Allow one week between slurry, first, and N applications.
  - Apply P and K as required based on soil tests.
  - If P and K are low, apply three bags 18:6:12 per acre now on all the grazing area.

#### WORKING 85+ HOURS PER WEEK:

- » Above represents the average hours worked in a recent week by the members of one of my discussion groups.
- And 25% of them worked more than 100 hours while they averaged less than six hours sleep per night.
  - They averaged three nights (sleeping time) in the yard supervising calving.
  - That's what you have to do in springtime if you are a dairy farmer!
  - I was telling that to some of my pub friends. Could they believe anyone would have to work so hard in this day and age? No. Madness they thought!
  - The good news is that it will be reducing after the first three weeks and it will be all over after six to seven weeks.
  - They were very interested in why it has to happen and the solutions to its reduction.
  - There are some very organised farmers getting by while working less hours/day/week. How?



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IRISH CREAMERY MILK SUPPLIERS ASSOCIATION

- The biggest problem is not having enough help.
- And, even if they do, some farmers are completely unable to delegate.
- Big time wasters are:
  - Sick cows – preventative action is critical so as to avoid ketosis, milk fever, mastitis etc.
  - Sick calves – again, it is all about prevention. Feeding high-quality colostrum, practising high levels of hygiene, having adequate, well-aerated housing, etc.
  - Pathogens in water seems to be an issue.
  - Weather was a huge factor in February; there is no doubt but that having cows at grass for a few hours per day is a great relief.
  - Genotyping calves has added a bit extra hardship/frustration. Olly O’Gorman, recently at a Zoom session, outlined his ‘lazy man’s approach’ to dealing with the issue: “Like everyone, I send away the calf’s sample for genotyping. I subsequently log into the DAFM website to check when the calf is there with his mother, father and sex identified. I add the date of birth of the calf, press ‘Accept’. And cards are back within three days.”
- A big worry is the lack of sleep and its effect on the farmers’ health. Family members must look out for those members who are working so hard and step in before something goes wrong.

#### “GREAT TO SEE MALE WHITEHEADS IN THE PEN!”

- » So said a very progressive dairy farmer of mine today! An amazing statement for a dairy farmer. Is he off his rocker? No!
- » Three and a half weeks into calving and he has all his dairy heifer calf requirement and pens full of beef calves, Herefords, Angus and even Charolais.
- » He has had many enquiries for his beef stock, which is very reassuring.
- » Having all his dairy replacements born so early means they will be easier reared and achieve target weights mainly from a grass diet.
- » There is only one breeding story from now on: use sexed semen on your best replacement heifers and cows to deliver the required number of dairy replacements.
- » Use easy calving, high DBI beef bulls on all other cows and heifers.
- » Because it will cost €95, not to mention the cost of synchronisation, to get a dairy sexed semen heifer calf on the ground it is essential not to use sexed semen on in-calf heifers or cows you may be selling next year:
  - Based on this year you won’t get paid for them!
- » From now to the start of breeding take the following into account when choosing the most suitable cows:
  - Identify your best cows.
  - Of these, identify cows that did not have: a difficult calving, ketosis, acidosis, milk fever, withheld cleaning, had womb infection, got mastitis, had high SCC or any other health issue. Therefore, from now you must make a record of cows with these issues and not use for sexed semen.
  - They must be aged from one to four lactations and have high fertility genetics.
- » Now is the time to order these straws – you will require 2.1 to 2.0

straws per heifer calf required.

- » Suggested sexed semen bulls to consider – compiled by one of my discussion groups:
  - The first point to make is that they are equally as good as the non-sexed choices available.
  - I concentrate on B&W bulls but it is so obvious that anyone using Jersey must use sexed semen.
  - FR9259, FR9899 (Hfs), FR9016 (Hfs), FR8637, FR9256, FR8908(Hfs), FR6484 (Hfs), FR9151 (Hfs), FR7926 (Hfs), FR7890 (Hfs), FR8403 (Hfs), FR8244, FR6469, FR8893, FR6547.

#### APPLYING HERTZBERG’S MOTIVATORS TO FARMING:

- » As herds get larger and the requirement for more staff increases on dairy farms, meeting staff’s needs and managing them in a job that now seriously competes with many other ‘quality’ jobs is one of the biggest, if not the biggest challenges, facing dairy farmers today.
- » My thanks to a very good farmer – who did a webinar with Lee Astridge from No8HR in New Zealand –who derived great benefit from Hertzberg’s theories (Google it) for bringing this man’s theories on employees’ satisfaction to my attention. It has two dimensions:

##### 1. Hygiene issues – these decrease an employee’s level of dissatisfaction with the job. They are:

- Relationship with peers – it is vital that the farm team works as a team
- Company policy – make your staff aware of your goals/expectations.
- Physical workplace – no doubt staff will, where they have choice, wish to work on attractive farms with good facilities. I know that relief milkers will always want to know many cows are milked and how many units are in the parlour. Who would want to milk 200 cows in a 10-unit parlour?
- Working conditions – staff now want:
  - Accommodation provided – it is generally hard to get good accommodation locally in rural communities.
  - Good office/canteen on farm to allow ‘personal space’, shower, change and dry clothes etc.
- Salary – good staff are worth a good salary; it is up to you to ‘help’ them overcome any deficiencies.
- Status – if a staff member has manager status treat them as such; if they have herdsman status, treat them as such, and so on.
- Security – we all need security of tenure and need to feel secure in the fact that our faults will not be shared outside the farm gate.
- Supervision – discrete supervision/overseeing – no cameras or ‘trick-catch-me-out options’ – will have merit in helping staff overcome various challenges.
- Motivators make workers more productive, creative and committed to the job.
- Achievement – by having to-do lists the employee can see, without the employer saying anything, that they completed a task and achieved something.
- Recognition – the employer must notice when an employee does a task to satisfaction both to the employee himself and, whenever, necessary, in from of his farm peers.



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- Responsibility – we must give staff responsibility.
  - Tell them you:
    - Rear the calves.
    - Milk the cows.
    - Measure the grass and upload on PastureBase.
    - Do heat detection every day you are working, etc.
    - This puts great onus on you, the manager, to train staff.
    - If you are someone who won't share responsibility, don't employ someone who wants responsibility.
  - Advancement – some staff will want to move on after a few years with you, so help him/her accordingly. If the staff member has a good experience on your farm, they will tell one person but if they have a bad experience they will tell five people. However, even though a staff member may appear 'settled' everyone wishes to advance him/herself. Therefore, involve them in as many decision-making aspects of the farm as is possible and provide training and recognition (introduce them to farm visitors/experts etc).
  - Growth opportunities – with a lot of students working on farms as well as not-so-young, knowledgeable farmers will always stimulate the educational side of the employees' brain – unfortunately many dairy farmers are very deficient on this knowledge-aspect of farming!
- » There are 13 'hygiene' and 'motivators' factors listed. I challenge you to rate yourself as an employer by scoring each out of five. Therefore, to rate yourself as a great employer you would have to score 65; and if you only score 13, you have a lot to learn/do.

### BITS AND PIECES

- » Prevent tetany, because magnesium deficiency results in cow deaths, sub-clinical situations results in milk yield being reduced by over 20% for whole herd:
- Feed the equivalent of 2oz/cow/day in meal (very convenient system) where meal is being fed. Co-ops should provide this level in 1.5-2kg meal.
  - Feed it through the water either, automatic system or five-gallon drum with a special dispenser.
  - Dust the pastures with magnesium at the rate of 5-6oz/cow/day. This works well and can be done while you are assessing farm cover in the paddock.
  - As calves at grass will thrive as well as those indoors and will have a lot less health problems while being easier to manage, let them out.
  - Why farmers don't adopt this practice I'll never understand.
  - Try to have fresh grass for them every three to five days by rotating them round small blocks of grass.
  - Feed hay or straw while at grass, as they need fibre (essential).
  - If the weather is wet and cold, farmers favour letting calves run back into a house but this can be dangerous unless it is well ventilated like a hay barn.
  - All they need outdoors is a dry lie and ground shelter because they spend a lot of time lying down.
  - There are several, cheap outdoor type shelter systems available.
  - Because calves are remaining longer on farms this year and health risks are greater this practice should be adopted.
- » Lameness: It must be addressed now because it will adversely affect:
- Milk yield and peak determines the annual yield.
  - Body condition – cows will lose weight.
  - Submission rates and conception rates – a disaster!
  - The cow's longevity in the herd.
  - Get the Farm Relief Service to examine your herd.
- » Bulling heifers (R2s):
- Weigh them. They must NOW be 53% of your mature cows' weight.
  - Let them out to grass soon, feed some meal if under target.
- » Mastitis/high SCC:
- Chronic cows should be culled – they will infect the whole herd
  - Make sure your milking machine and milking routine are up to scratch.
  - Record on ICBF all cases of clinical mastitis.
  - Mastitis adversely affects fertility.
  - Get your vet involved early to sort things out.
- » Milk recording is an essential management tool – no excuses, do it:
- You will know your high SCC cows.
  - You will be able to identify your best cows for breeding to dairy, others for beef AI, and others for culling (should be done now).



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### THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH

**Once the need for training has been established, you must set very clear training objectives and then plan how these are achieved!**





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# GOOD THINGS COME IN THREES

**SINCE ITS LAUNCH IN 2022, THE LANDINI 6RS HAS BEEN A STRONG CONTENDER FOR FIELD WORK, FORAGE APPLICATIONS, ROAD TRANSPORT AND FARM HANDLING. HERE, WE REMIND OURSELVES OF THE MAIN FEATURES OF THIS THREE-MODEL RANGE**

**The Stage V Landini 6RS sits squarely in an important sector of the market and was developed following considerable customer and dealer input, according to the company.** It incorporates Landini heritage but with the latest technology at the heart of the machine.

There are three models in the range: the 135hp 6-135; the 145hp 6-145; and the 155hp 6-155. All figures are maximum-power outputs, produced by 4.5L NEF 45 engines from FPT, with four cylinders and four valves per cylinder.

## POWER

A compact powertrain and transmission layout allows for a wheelbase of 2,560mm, for maximum stability, versatility and manoeuvrability. The Roboshift 6RS transmission features four ranges, each with six powershift steps, providing 24F/24R speeds, extendable to 40R/40R when the creep option is specified.

## GETTING ATTACHED

Implement attachment specification includes a four-speed rear PTO, rear-lift capacity of up

to 7,200kg and optional 2,500kg-capacity front linkage. Closed-centre hydraulics feature a 123L/min pump capable of supplying up to seven spool valves.

## A VISION

The 6RS tractors are fitted with the mechanically suspended Landini 'High Vision' cab, with FOPS-homologated panoramic roof incorporating a hatch for natural ventilation. Vision is further enhanced by up to 14 LED lights, eight of which are in the roof, while comfort can be bolstered by optional front axle suspension. Automotive-grade interior materials are used throughout, and control of key functions is centred around a 12-inch touchscreen monitor and all-in-one multi-function joystick. Landini's Precision Steering Management system controls and manages satellite guidance, and integrates with the tractors' Isobus implement control system and Landini Fleet & Remote Diagnostic Management. Externally, service access is enhanced by a new 90-degree opening bonnet and radiators arranged in a fan shape for easy servicing.



**NOEL DUNNE**  
Machinery editor

## SPRING HAS SPRUNG

**Well, readers, spring is in the air! The daffodils are popping up and being joined by various other early-blooming flowers.** There is a stretch in the evenings, and the Six Nations are heading for the final furlong with the winning posts in sight. St Patrick's Day is a matter of a few weeks away. The first quarter of 2024 is done!

I don't know about your houses but in ours, the Christmas decorations are still at the end of the stairs awaiting their visit to the attic for their summer vacation. The last few months have passed by with such speed that if time continues to go by at this pace, I don't think I will bother putting them in the attic at all!

I think as we get older, time goes by quicker. And, as farmers – as season watchers – maybe we live life at a faster pace? I once said to a friend of mine that it is like we are on a treadmill, frantically running to achieve something but remaining in a static position of stress, strain, running operations, and paying bills...and repeat. Is this life? Just getting from day to day, month to month, and year to year? Well, readers, I don't know how relevant this month's rant is but we all need to offload sometimes, to clean out the mind, and get a fresher perspective. Now, down to the business in hand. I was away for a few days in February and met up one evening with two farmers – one from the UK and the other from Germany. As we sipped our cold beers in the evening sun, naturally all things turned to farming and farming issues, farm protests, commodity prices, farming among the many sanctions being put in place. The most extraordinary thing was that if I asked them to write down six things affecting them and their businesses, and I did the same, there would be little if any difference in the issues outlined (despite the UK no longer being in the EU). The universal crisis facing farmers worldwide from India to Italy to Ireland is the exact same – dominated by poor commodity prices, high input costs, and the demand for cheap food.

On the machinery front I see that more GPS units were stolen in the first few weeks of 2024 than in the whole of 2023. Thieves are now more interested in stealing technologies than tractors as there is an instant market for this kit. So, farmers and contractors, please photograph your kit and log the serial numbers!

CNH Industrial has reported a turnover growth of 5 per cent over 2023. Its agri brands are New Holland, Case and Steyr.

Farmhand, Irish importers of Amazone machinery, has announced a new finance package on all machinery – except sprayers. Check in with your local Amazone for details.

I attended a Hennessy Auctioneers' machinery auction at the end of February. More than 1,000 lots were on offer and trade was brisk showing the ever popularity of these types of auctions. Something that caught my eye a few weeks ago, now being imported in to Ireland from India by Noel Turley Auto Sales in Co. Galway is a Indian-built electric quad – the Powerland Tachyon. I will have more on this at a later date but this could be an ideal fit on dairy farms and could become a real contender in the future.

Until next month, my friends, farm safely and farm wisely.

Stage V emission compliant thanks to the exhaust gas post-treatment system, the range features the 6-135 RS, 6-145 RS and 6-155 RS models, powered by 4.5L, 16-valve, 4-cylinder FPT NEF 45 engines, with power outputs of 135hp, 145hp and 155hp.





## TERRA TRAC WINS FOUR IN A ROW



Claas has won the Grand Prix in the International Product Development category at the Hungarian agricultural fair, AGROMashEXPO in Budapest with its Xerion 12.650 Terra Trac. This is the fourth award in a row for the Terra Trac after

Tractor of the Year 2024, Farm Machine 2024 (large tractor category) and AE50 Award "It is absolutely extraordinary to receive four awards for a new product in such a short period space of time," said Dr Martin von Hoyningen-Huene, chief technology officer,

Claas Group, and responsible for the tractors and implements division. "Thanks to its unique features, the large tractor sets benchmarks in many ways that help our customers work even more productively and efficiently while reducing the burden on the driver and the environment." The Xerion 12 series is positioned above the Xerion 4200, Xerion 4500 and Xerion 5000 models, which are available as Trac, Trac VC and Saddle Trac variants (Xerion 4200 only). After a successful start of production at the main plant in Harsewinkel, an initially limited number of machines will be built this year and marketed in the core target markets. It will be introduced in other sales regions at the same time, according to the company.



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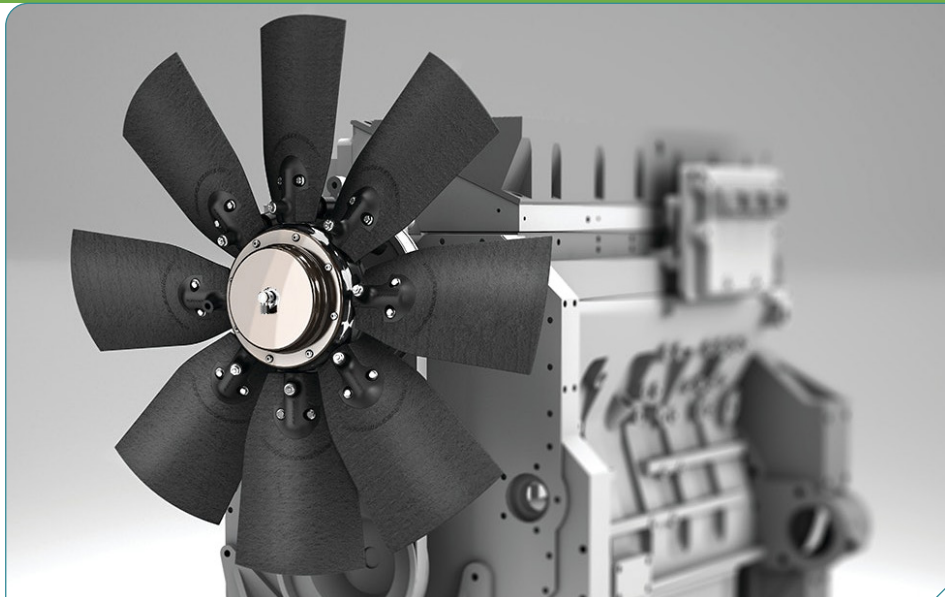


## FLEXXAIRE FAN OFFER WHEN BOUGHT WITH ZUIDBERG PTO

Farmhand is offering €500 off a Flexxaire reversible fan when purchased with a Zuidberg PTO. "The addition of a Flexxaire reversible fan and Zuidberg PTO for your tractor will improve operator comfort, free up engine power and increase efficiency, order before the end of March and save €500," said a Farmhand spokesperson.

Keeping your radiator free and clear means less downtime and increased efficiency, especially while mowing or baling. Fast reversing of blade pitch makes it possible for the cleaning cycle to quickly clear debris from radiators even in the most extreme conditions. "The operator can trigger the fan to blow outwards manually by hitting a button in the cab or have it set to happen at time intervals. The cooling fan system can read the engine temperature from the ECU and knows when and how to adjust the blade pitch at any fan speed to keep your machine cool and to prevent overheated fluids in engine, transmission, and hydraulic systems," the spokesperson said.

They added: "Equip your tractor for mowing with a Zuidberg front PTO geared to suit almost



any make and model of tractor. The Zuidberg front PTO features a multi plate wet clutch with adjustable engagement, guaranteeing smooth implement operation and pro-longed lifespan of front linked machines. Ease of use is ensured when coupling the shaft to the PTO, since the

stump can be rotated up to 60 degrees. "Together the Flexxaire reversible fan and the Zuidberg front PTO are the ideal additions for saving time and fuel, as well as ensuring maximum possible engine power is available," said the spokesperson.

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Models: 3000/3400

Cut widths: 3m(10ft), 3.4m(11.2ft)



**3000MC**

Models: 2600/3000

Cut widths: 2.6m(8.6ft), 3m(10ft)



**3000TC**

Models: 2600/3000/3800

Cut widths: 2.6m(8.6ft), 3m(10ft), 3.8m(12.6ft)

## TEDD-AIR RANGE

- Double Hook Tines • Kennifixx Hydraulic Connections • Height Adjustment • Rear Lights • Spare Wheel



**840**

Models: 570/840

Mounted Tedd-Air widths: 5.7m(19ft), 8.4m(28ft)



**1128**

Models: 840/1128

Trailed Tedd-Air widths: 8.4m(28ft), 11.28m(37ft)

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- Front and Cab suspension
- Fendt Vario & TMS
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## Fendt 300 Vario

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- Fendt 314 Vario Profi+: 142hp max / 152hp with DP
- CCLS pump, 4 valves and 3 Speed PTO
- Front and Cab suspension
- Fendt 312 Vario includes Cargo Loader Package (4X75C inc 3rd Service)

## Fendt 500 Vario

### Offer spec includes:

- Fendt 514 Vario Power: 156hp max
- Fendt 516 Vario Power+: 171hp max
- Front Power Lift, 110l/min CCLS pump, 4 valves
- Available with Cargo Loader Package (4X80 inc 3rd service)
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## FARMERS UNREST

Recent unrest among farmers in Europe is worrying and the issues that they are demonstrating about will have to be addressed. It could be considered smug if I said 'I told you so' but I think I will. Over many contributions to *Irish Farmers Monthly*, I have highlighted the issues that are bringing farmers across all of Europe out in protest. It doesn't need a university degree to understand why there is so much unrest within the farming sector that, like it or not, includes agricultural contractors, whose future depends on a sustainable farming sector. Price increases for inputs such as fuel and fertiliser, to name but two, are not reflected in the farmgate price or by Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) payments.

The Commission, by pushing for trade agreements that allow cheap imports of agricultural products, is serving to undermine the price that European farmers can hope to achieve. This, along with a never-ending flow of directives and regulations and the resulting cost of compliance, puts European farmers at an immediate disadvantage to those countries that the Commission are happy to sign trade agreements with and who have a huge advantage due to cheap labour, a lack of employment rights or health and safety and environmental legislation. Compliance with all such requirements adds considerably to the cost of European agricultural produce.

### FOOD SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

When questioning the wisdom of the Commission's policy regarding trade agreements, it is not just about giving European farmers a fairer deal, it is about food security for the European Union, which appears to have been abandoned. My long-held belief is that it's all about money. It goes back to the Commission's wish to reduce CAP expenditure and the shortfall in Europe's budget due to Brexit and resulting loss of UK contributions. As the CAP is Europe's biggest expenditure, the Commission took the easy option to reduce the

cost of CAP by buying in cheaper agricultural produce from outside Europe.

### REPEATING MISTAKES

It seems to me that our European politicians are too young to remember World War 2 and its impact on agricultural output. The shortage of food and rationing that people across Europe had to endure is the reason behind why most European countries pledged to become self-sufficient in food, to secure an adequate food supply, and the free flow of food and agricultural products within Europe. It is clear, we do not need World War 3 to experience food shortages. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Red Sea attacks have disrupted the food chain and caused food shortages leading to rapid price increases. There are many flash points around the world that can disrupt the supply of food into Europe. The establishment of new trade alliances with Africa, South America, China and Russia means they will have control of our food supply. We in Europe must strive to be food secure, and a sustainable agricultural sector is mainly what the farmers' protest is all about. Do we have European MPs with vision? Do we have European MPs who have studied history? All the signs indicate that we don't.

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Väderstad Cultus HD 300-400.

# CENTAYA C – SUPER AND SPECIAL



Amazone introduced the Centaya-C Super harrow-mounted seed drill for combined grain and fertiliser sowing in autumn 2022. Now, it is also available in a smaller version as the Centaya-C Special pneumatic harrow-mounted seed drill. This is available in working widths of 3m, 3.5m, and 4m with twin-chamber hopper with a capacity of 1,500L.

The hopper is split with a 70:30 divide, enabling two different materials in volumes of 1,050L and 450L to be filled. The application of these materials are metered separately and precisely with the Isobus control and infinitely variable electric metering allows seed rates of 0.5-400kg/ha at a working speed of 10km/h.

The conveying system feeds the materials to the coulters via the segmented distributor head. This simple conveying system transports the seed and the fertiliser to the coulter using the single-shoot process, they are then sown into the soil via the coulter.

The Centaya-C Special can be equipped with an additional Micro plus micro-granular applicator. This 110L hopper enables the driver to apply a third material in the same pass. The material, such as micro-nutrients or low seed rates, is fed into the main conveying system of the Centaya-C Special and is also applied using the single-shoot process.

The Centaya-C harrow-mounted seed drill can be combined with the various soil tillage implements via QuickLink. Depending on the requirements, the Centaya can be coupled with a KX or KG power harrow. It is also possible to combine the Centaya with the CombiDisc compact disc harrow on light soils.



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\*For Business Users Only. This is a Fixed Rate Business Hire Purchase Agreement. Lending terms & conditions apply. Finance is provided by Amazone Finance, which is a trading name of First Citizen Finance DAC. First Citizen Finance DAC is regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland. A Completion Fee of €1 is payable. Offer is available on all new machines except Amazone sprayers and trailed drills. Offer only available to Republic of Ireland customers. Warning: You may have to pay charges if you repay early, in full or in part, a fixed-rate credit facility.

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For more information on Amazone finance please speak to your local Amazone dealer or call Ben Buckley on +353 87 758 6746

**farmhand**  
WORKS FOR THE FARMER

## SWAINE AGRI APPOINTED AS OFFICIAL KVERNELAND DEALER

Kverneland Group Ireland has appointed Swaine Agri, Co. Offaly, as an official dealer from 2024, marking a significant expansion of Kverneland's dealer network in Ireland. Swaine Agri is an established business for more than 30 years and is, according to Kverneland, 'poised to play a vital role in enhancing Kverneland's outreach and meeting the evolving needs of farmers and contractors in the area.'

Kverneland Group Ireland, headquartered in Co. Kilkenny, is part of the Kverneland Group, a global agricultural company with a legacy dating back to 1879.

Philip English, managing director of Kverneland Group Ireland, said the addition of Swaine Agri marks a significant milestone for Kverneland. "We believe that their strong local presence and commitment to customer satisfaction will greatly contribute to our mission of providing innovative and high-quality agricultural machinery."

Co. Offaly holds strategic importance in Kverneland's expansion plans, and the partnership aims to offer a comprehensive range of machinery tailored to the needs of farmers and contractors in the region. The product line-up includes ploughs, cultivation equipment, seeding tools, spraying equipment, fertiliser spreaders, mowers, rakes, tedders, balers, and bale choppers.

Liam Swaine, director of Swaine Agri, shared his thoughts on the appointment: "The renowned name and exceptional quality of Kverneland equipment make us thrilled to offer these cutting-edge



Philip English, managing director, Kverneland Group Ireland and Liam Swaine, owner of Swaine Agri, Ballyheashill, Co. Offaly.

agricultural solutions. We believe that by providing farmers and contractors in Co. Offaly with access to such high-calibre machinery, we are not only contributing to advancing agriculture but also offering them a more profitable way of working. The strong reputation and reliability of Kverneland products align perfectly with our commitment to delivering top-notch equipment and services, ensuring that local farmers can enhance their efficiency and productivity."

Swaine Agri will host an open day at its premises in Ballyheashill, Co. Offaly in March, where a range of Kverneland and McConnell equipment will be on display.



### DOES YOUR DRILL HAVE?

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WHEN FARMING MEANS BUSINESS [www.kverneland.ie](http://www.kverneland.ie)



SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH CONTRACTOR, ALFIE BYRNE'S, TESTIMONIAL ON HIS U-DRILL

## NEW AND IMPROVED FOR 2024

Väderstad is set to introduce new models and upgrades to its renowned Cultus and Cultus HD product families in 2024, the company has confirmed. In 2023, Väderstad successfully launched the Cultus HD 425-525, a mounted foldable tine cultivator available in 4.25m and 5.25m configurations. This innovation complemented the existing 3-4m rigid tine cultivator, Cultus 300-400. Cultus HD boasts a heavy-duty tine with a 680kg release force, while Cultus features a robust tine with a 480kg release force. "We are excited to introduce the heavy-duty Cultus HD to the 3-4m rigid segment, simultaneously extending the Cultus family into the 4.25-5.25m segment," says Wolfram Hastolz director, tillage product management at Väderstad. This means Väderstad will offer the following product families, going forward:

- ▶ Cultus 300-400 – Rigid 3-4m, mounted or trailed;
- ▶ Cultus 425-525 – Foldable 4.25-5.25m, mounted;
- ▶ Cultus HD 300-400 – Rigid 3-4m, mounted or trailed; and
- ▶ Cultus HD 425-525 – Foldable 4.25-5.25m, mounted.

"The new machine models complete our tine cultivator range in the 3-5.25m segment, offering our outstanding Cultus and Cultus HD to suit the full range of field conditions," said Wolfram.

While introducing new models, Väderstad is also enhancing the existing 3-4m machines. The upgraded models feature a completely new frame designed to improve field performance and extend working life. Notable enhancements include the introduction of hydraulic leveler settings and the option to fit a double packer, the Double SoilRunner, for reconsolidation, according to the company.



## The new Carrier XT

Carrier XT has the ability to optimise the disc angles to its working depth. This creates a full cut-out at a shallower working depth or reduced soil flow at a deeper working depth. Both of these factors contribute to a lower diesel consumption.

Carrier XT can either be delivered as a trailed or mounted version. The working width is 4.25, 5.25 or 6.25m. All Carrier XT models can be equipped with a range of both single and double packer options.



Learn more at [vaderstad.com](http://vaderstad.com)

**VÄDERSTAD**  
Where farming starts

## TEGOSEM HOPPER – HOT FOR 2024

**IRISH FARMERS MONTHLY CHECKED IN WITH PÖTTINGER THIS MONTH TO SEE WHAT IS HOT IN TILLAGE TERMS FOR 2024 AND HERE IS WHAT WE FOUND OUT**

**The Tegosem hopper is available as an option for a wide range of machines – whether tillage implements or seed drills – to cover a broad spectrum of applications.**

With the Tegosem, soil cultivation, seeding and application of different seed and fertiliser materials can be carried out in a single pass. This saves time and money. The flexible hopper can be combined with both linkage

mounted and trailed machines. Thanks to the two different metering shafts, grass seed or similar companion crop seeds can be sown in addition to small and large-seed cover crops. Used in combination with a Pöttinger seed drill, the Tegosem enables an additional component to be applied to the surface. This means that the sowing of companion crops or cover crops can be carried out on the same

pass to conserve the soil. Small seeds are very good for adding to cover crop mixtures but require placement on or near the surface for optimum germination.

The Tegosem enables material to be deposited on top, while placing the majority of the mixture deeper down. As a result, several components can be included successfully in the cover crop mixture. Soil fertility is also given a positive boost, because mixtures with at least eight different types of seed are proven to promote soil life and increase the biodiversity of microorganisms.

The Terrasem seed drill with Tegosem sowing unit enables three components to be applied simultaneously. This means that companion crops can be sown with the main crop. In addition, a component from the Tegosem can be fed directly into the coulter. At the same time, the Fertilizer-Pro coulters are used to deposit starter fertiliser.

**The Terria, Synkro, Terradisc, Lion and Fox tillage and seedbed preparation implements are also available with the Tegosem.**

A major advantage here, according to Pöttinger, is being able to combine tillage with sowing a cover crop, because suitable weather windows are often short and every second counts. Precious time is saved by eliminating the hour pass, especially in terms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), where fallow land over the winter can now be easily avoided. A cover crop or companion crop can also be sown using the Tegosem as part of a crop-care

measure. Companion crops are particularly suitable for root crops with wide row spacing to protect against erosion and making the soil easier to drive over in the autumn. They have the advantage of stabilising the soil with their roots and improving drainage. The Rotocare rotary hoe breaks up the soil crust while the seed is added directly behind the raised flow of soil. This means that the seed material or granules are then covered with soil. In addition, moving the soil causes the mineralization of nutrients, which benefit the companion crop and the main crop.



# LEMKEN'S TOP TILLAGE OFFERINGS FOR 2024

IN THIS ISSUE OF *IRISH FARMERS MONTHLY*, WE FEATURE A TILLAGE INNOVATION FOCUS, AND WITH A NOD TO THAT, LEMKEN UPDATES US ON SOME OF ITS LATEST OFFERINGS FOR THE TILLAGE SECTOR



## FLEXPACK FURROW PRESS FOR ROCKY SOILS

The Lemken FlexPack is already well established as an integrated plough furrow press among professional farmers. It automatically adjusts to the working width as it runs parallel to the plough frame. Now the agricultural machinery specialist is launching a successor model with numerous improvements. The most important innovation concerns working with Juwel and Titan series ploughs with OptiStone, according to the company. Thanks to a special attachment on the frame, these ploughs with hydraulic overload protection can also be equipped with the FlexPack to achieve good reconsolidation in rocky soils and restore the capillarity of the soil structure for an optimally prepared seedbed. The rings have also been updated. These are now attached to the carrier via spring steel elements so that the FlexPack can also be used successfully in heavy soils. They can deflect upwards as well as sideways if they encounter stones or coarse clods and therefore ensure trouble-free work. Larger ring bearings additionally ensure high stability. The pressure load of the FlexPack is infinitely adjustable. The new FlexPack will be available in limited quantities in 2024.

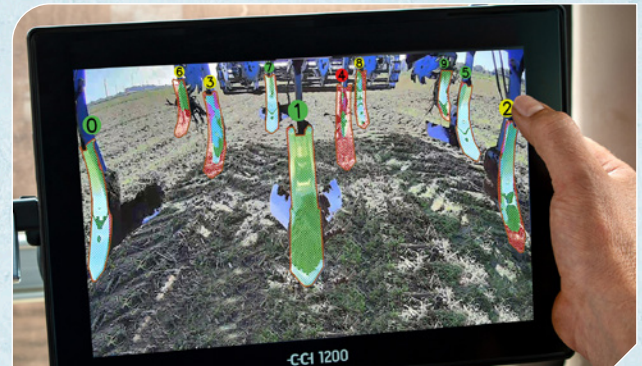


## MOUNTED KORALIN

After the semi-mounted version, Lemken now presents a low-draught mounted version of the Koralin, which makes this machine accessible to a larger number of farms. Thanks to its full-width tine section, the Koralin is suitable for both ultra-shallow tillage and mechanical weed

control that cuts weeds across the full working width.

The Koralin works with a three-point linkage and its three rows of tines are arranged symmetrically with a 30cm tine spacing over a working width of 6.6m. Its 38cm-wide DeltaCut shares guarantee shallow tillage across the full width from a working depth of only two centimetres. In contrast to conventional spring tine cultivators, the shares are rigidly mounted and therefore maintain their working depth precisely. The tines are secured with shear bolts but can also be equipped with automatic overload protection. Depth control is taken care of hydraulically via a double-acting control valve. The hydraulic cylinders of the laterally and centrally arranged depth control wheels are intelligently connected for this purpose. The Koralin delivers excellent, water-conserving performance, according to Lemken, during the first and second stubble breaking. It is additionally suitable for incorporating catch crops and for weed control before sowing, for example. It will go into its first series production in spring 2024.



## CAMERA FOR MONITORING CULTIVATOR SHARE WEAR

In December 2022, Lemken invested in Dutch ag-tech company, Track 32 to work on future technologies. In September 2023, the partnership launched iQblue tool monitoring. This is a system for detecting tool breakage and wear and analysing the wear of cultivator shares. The camera system monitors the shares and automatically records their current condition while working at the headland. It therefore provides farmers with a valuable decision-making aid for changing and buying spare parts, according to Lemken. iQblue tool monitoring is the first system on the market that ensures objective assessment even in difficult conditions. The system comprises a camera, which takes a large number of individual images of the tine section on a three-metre-wide cultivator while working at the headland.

A software algorithm evaluates the condition of the shares, which is then displayed on the Isobus terminal via a traffic-light system. Extensively worn shares are shown in red, while damaged shares are marked in yellow and intact shares in green. Based on this information, the system calculates not only future wear but also the point in time at which it makes sense to replace the shares. If necessary, users can retrieve the current tool status at any time.



Agricultural contractor,  
Alfie Byrne.

**AGRICULTURAL CONTRACTOR, ALFIE BYRNE FROM KILDAVIN, CO. CARLOW, TELLS US WHY HE SETTLED ON KVERNELAND'S U-DRILL, WHICH HE PURCHASED FOR THE AUTUMN 2022 SEEDING SEASON**

**With 34 years' experience as a contractor, Alfie's business revolves around tillage and forage contracting where he handles the full range of farming operations. We caught up with him sowing the last of the spring barley.**

"The reason we bought the new drill was because the first minute I saw it, I was very impressed with the build quality and the whole setup of the drill," says Alfie. The Kverneland u-drill is a universal seed drill for all crop-establishment systems, planting a wide range of crops, including cereals, oilseeds, and legumes. It uses a unique drilling system that delivers the seed precisely and consistently, resulting in better crop emergence and more uniform plant growth. The focus in design has been given to high-speed operation (10-18km/h) with a low-pulling requirement while ensuring a perfect seed placement.

**FRONT WHEEL PACKER**

Alfie says he particularly likes the levelling characteristics of the u-drill. "The front wheel packer is an absolutely super job and the big wheel, I think, is a major plus. With this drill the wheel is higher and wider, which makes it easier to pull and floats the ground better."

For the best possible preparation, the front tyre packer levels the soil, crushes large clods and paves the way for the optimum depth control of the following tools. The front tyre packer has a diameter of 800mm and when not needed can be lifted hydraulically, simply by pushing a button.

This system results in consistent seed-to-soil contact essential for optimal germination and plant growth. With the Kverneland CD-coulter, the narrow profile of the coulters with their slightly offset steel discs allow easy penetration into the soil so little pressure is required at this point with only little soil being displaced. The coulter pressure of 100kg can, therefore, be primarily used for the pressing by the integrated press wheels. The result is a uniform seeding depth even at high working speeds.

The 'u' in u-drill stands for 'universal' and this not only refers to crop systems but also soil conditions. Alfie explains: "Especially in wet conditions. It's inclined to just float along the ground and it gets through the wet spot easier." With soil compaction always a concern for farmers with heavy conditions, this is an important consideration.

**AUTOMATED HEADLAND MANAGEMENT**

Designed with a fully automated headland management system, using just one button, the driver can initiate a headland sequence with wheels, discs and coulter bar all capable of automatic operation in timed stages. As the headland sequence starts, the metering device stops automatically – avoiding double

seeding while the seed hoses are empty at the headland, saving valuable seed. User experience is always a key focus and means cab control of operations is an important feature of the u-drill. For farmers and contractors, flexibility and ease of operation are key as each field has its own soil structure and specific working conditions. For a busy contractor like Alfie less time out of the cab means more time getting the job completed. The drill's functionality allows all operations to be controlled from the tractor cab via either the tractor's Isobus terminal or Kverneland's Tellus terminal.

The u-drill is available in working widths of 3m, 4m and 6m folding to carry out seedbed preparation, levelling, reconsolidation, seeding and pressing in one pass. The drill is available as grain only or the grain and fertiliser application model, with split hopper functionality. Alfie is so impressed with the drill he says: "I'd definitely recommend the drill to others. I actually think it's the drill of the future."

**TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS**

Model	Working width	Row distance (cm)	Hopper capacity
u-drill rigid	3m	12.5 / 16.7	3,000L
u-drill folding	4m	12.5 / 16.7	3,000L
u-drill folding	6m	12.5 / 16.7	4,350L
u-drill plus (grain and fertiliser)	3m	12.5 / 16.7	3,000L
u-drill plus folding	4m	12.5 / 16.7	3,000L
u-drill plus folding	6m	12.5 / 16.7	4,350L

# CELEBRATING THREE DECADES OF PARTNERSHIP

LAST MONTH, WELL-KNOWN AND RESPECTED DEALERS, KELLY'S OF BORRIS, CELEBRATED A SIGNIFICANT MILESTONE AS ITS PARTNERSHIP WITH CLAAS REACHED 30 YEARS! ESTABLISHED IN 1957, KELLY'S HAS GONE FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH. IT HAS TAKEN ON SOME MAJOR MACHINERY FRANCHISES OVER THE YEARS OFFERING MACHINERY AND PARTS BY: HORSCH (TILLAGE EQUIPMENT); REDROCK (TRAILERS AND SLURRY EQUIPMENT); PRONAR (TRAILERS AND CHASER BINS); RICHARD WESTERN (MUCK SPREADERS); AGRI-SPREAD (PRECISION SPREADERS); PRODIG (FORKS AND BALE-HANDLING EQUIPMENT); SHERBOURNE REYNOLDS (HEDGE CUTTERS); AGXEED (AUTONOMOUS TRACTORS); AND MORE. THREE RECENT DAYS CULMINATED IN A SPECIAL EVENING EVENT TO MARK THE COMPANY'S ENDURING RELATIONSHIP WITH CLAAS. HERE, WE PRESENT A SNAPSHOT OF THE OCCASION



Performing the official celebrations and presentations at the event: Michael Farrelly, executive director FTMTA; Maurice Kelly, managing director, Kelly's of Borris; Trevor Tyrrell, Claas senior vice president for western Europe; Karol Duigenan, regional sales manager, Claas UK and current president of the FTMTA.



Stephen Cooney, sales and service manager of Farmec Ireland with some of the Sulky machinery on display at the event.



Peter Robinson, regional head of sales for Dutch agricultural autonomous robot company, AgXeed pictured with John Hughes, chair of the Association of Farm & Forestry Contractors in Ireland. This is a new appointment for Kelly's of Borris and this is the first commercially available autonomous tractor available in Ireland and can be seen at Kelly's Borris branch.



Stuart Butterworth, territory sales manager, Grange Machinery (UK) with Mick Brennan, Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny. Kelly's of Borris was recently appointed dealers for Grange Machinery tillage equipment.



Pictured in front of the latest Prodig equipment on display at Kelly's open evening was Donny Nolan, managing director Prodig based in Co Carlow.

# KNOWING YOUR NICHE

**WHERE SOME SEE A CRISIS, OTHERS SEE AN OPPORTUNITY. MEAT PROCESSOR, OAKPARK, TURNED THE TWIN THREATS OF BREXIT AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC INTO NEW MARKET EXPANSION. IN ADVANCE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST FOOD AND BEVERAGE TRADE FAIR, GULFOOD (WHICH TOOK PLACE LAST MONTH) IRISH FARMERS MONTHLY SPOKE TO MANAGING DIRECTOR, DAVID BRETT, ABOUT THE COMPANY'S MOVE INTO THE MIDDLE EAST**

## **Oakpark is a fourth-generation family-owned pork and poultry processor.**

Founded in 1940 by Bridget Brett and her four sons, it has grown into an award-winning company servicing multinational customers. But it was Brexit, David tells us, that turned Oakpark's attention to the Middle East. "It [Brexit] was a shock to the system. We didn't know if we could trade with our biggest customer outside of the domestic market. We rode the storm and have subsequently grown our business in the UK and made it more efficient, but it made us think about things." Enterprise Ireland had encouraged the Tipperary-based company to look beyond the UK and Brexit provided the motivation. "We did a bit of research and found that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was one of the higher growth markets for Irish food exports," he says.

With a dedicated poultry facility, the product concept was in place and Bord Bia was enlisted to aid the process. "Dubai, the UAE, it's a long distance. It's not like the UK, you can't just hop on a flight," says David. "We engaged with the Bord Bia office in-market and went on its Plan to Grow programme in 2019. The Bord Bia Dubai office took a huge snapshot of the retail market for us, by retailer and by stock-keeping unit (SKU). It gave us a picture of the market so that we could explore what we could do there and how we could fit in."

If Brexit offered a research phase, a global pandemic was the catalyst for action. "Being retail focused, Covid-19 was a stressful period for our business, but we also took the time, from a new-product perspective, to decide to go after the UAE market because we wanted to be in a position to dive into something new," says David.

"Initially, we focused on developing a halal range for the local Muslim community and decided not to use the Oakpark brand. We wanted something that felt more local, that resonated with people. We worked with Bord Bia on its Bi:TES (Better Ideas: Think Evaluate Select) programme, engaged a design agency in the UAE and came up with the brand name, Marbaana. We managed to get our first listing in quarter four. Two years later and we've a decent foundation there to build from."



Oakpark managing director, David Brett.

## **MARBAANA**

Marbaana is sold through retail and the range's top-selling products are unsmoked and smoked turkey strips. Made exclusively using breast meat, its quality has proved popular over the current market offering, says David. "It's low in fat and much higher in protein versus the highly processed version of turkey bacon. We have brought a new consumer into the 'strip' category in the UAE and retailers have responded positively to that, as it's a win for them as well."

Expansion is on the horizon. "The strategy for Marbaana was the Muslim consumer, and we are leveraging its success in other Muslim countries across the Gulf region. We've done a couple of promotions with LuLu hypermarkets in Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, and trials in

other countries and they've gone positively," David explains. A move into new channels is another area of opportunity. "We have had a number of requests, particularly from our distributor, to diversify into foodservice with the brand. We are a retail-focused business but we're open to things. It's something that we are working on in the background."

## **EXPANDING THE BRAND**

With the Marbaana brand established, David saw the potential to explore other audiences within the UAE, bringing the Oakpark range to the large ex-pat community. "We've done a lot of work on our brand in Ireland and the UK over the last number of years: we're now number two within the bacon category in Ireland; in the UK market, we have the number two turkey bacon brand. We're listed in all major supermarkets in the UK, so the British and Irish consumer recognise the Oakpark brand.

"We knew we could launch what people are used to, what they see as 'home' when they're abroad in the UAE markets: our Oakpark brand. We developed a couple of SKUs that we're launching at Gulfood 24. There is no difference in taste to the product that you get in Dublin or London. The only difference is it's fully halal." The range consists of smoked and unsmoked turkey rashers and the new turkey pudding. "That has been a massive success story for our business over the last two years and we've subsequently launched more pudding products in the UK. This will be our first pudding product in the UAE so we're looking forward to that."

## **ROUTES TO MARKET**

Through innovation and new product development, the Middle East looks set to become a lucrative market. "We're working on a sous-vide halal range for the UAE market, and a number of meal solutions using pulled turkey and pulled chicken products, all first-of-its-kind." It would be easy to assume that the Marbaana launch paved a smooth path for Oakpark's entry to market, but location and culture remain key challenges. "It's very hard when you're on the other side of the world. Retailing [there] is extremely different to here:



there are different consumer tastes, retailers operate differently, different distribution models, and that was a major adjustment for us. We have learned a lot, and we have a clearer vision of how we can get Oakpark to market." But when you do arrive, the door is open, says David. "It's a lot easier to get a meeting with the UAE retail trade when they hear you're from Ireland, particularly when you mention Origin Green. Bord Bia does a lot of work with retailers in the region and we're Gold members so that

has been a big help." Support from Bord Bia continues, with in-store activity planned around uniquely Irish occasions such as St Patrick's Day. "We met with one of our key customers, Choithrams, and we are looking at an Irish week around St Patrick's Day in 2024 where Bord Bia will work with us on tastings and promotional activity. There are a number of Irish suppliers in that particular retailer so that gets a lot of traction." Back home, what does David see as the

upcoming challenges for the sector? "We're by no means out of the cost-of-living crisis. It was quite challenging in 2023, we had to look at everything throughout our supply chain to try to ensure that we are as cost competitive as we can be in this environment so that the consumer can still afford our product range." The can-do attitude prevails. "I tell everyone in our business: the opportunities are absolutely endless if you go into a market with an open mind."

## WORK IN PROGRESS

"We're proud to have been awarded Origin Green Gold membership in 2023. It's testament to the work that we're carrying out. Over the last three or four years, our rasher packaging has moved from zero per cent to 90 per cent recyclable and by the middle of 2025 we'll get that to 100 per cent. That is the target without compromise.

"But we now need to close the loop and use post-consumer recycled material in our plastic. Currently, about 35 per cent of the plastic we use is post-consumer

recycled. We've set targets over the next number of years to get that as close to 100 per cent as possible.

"We've invested significantly in reducing our Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions. We've put in solar panels on both our sites this year. Our phase two solar panel investment is going in at the end of January 2024. Following that, approximately 25 per cent of our electricity will be renewable, generated from our rooftops. We're using a mixture of natural gas and LPG on our sites. We've

just been approved for an investment that will slash our LPG usage in half using a heat recovery system off our refrigeration. Scope 3 emissions are a bigger challenge and we have engaged the industry, we are now looking at our supply chain with our retail customers. The retailer, the supplier, the farmer: we're in it together and the ultimate aim is to get to net zero by 2050. We feel that the Government's 2030 targets are achievable for our business and hope to surpass them before 2030. We're in this for the long haul."



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MATT O'KEEFE  
EDITOR



# THEY'RE NOT MAKING ANY MORE OF IT

**The demands being placed on land to fulfil a myriad of purposes are incapable of being met.**

In the broad agricultural sphere alone, there are ambitions to grow more trees, expand our tillage area, build solar farms, provide for increased biodiversity, deliver on rewetting aspirations, provide feedstock for a nascent biomethane industry and fulfil land demand for more intensified milk production to cater for a reduced Nitrates Derogation. Not all these needs are exclusive. Rewetting and increased biodiversity, resulting in at least a significantly reduced stocking rate if such land is to carry livestock at all, can be sourced from existing farmland. Likewise, biomethane feedstocks can be sourced from land hitherto devoted to livestock or other production. Solar farms are being created as alternatives for existing production uses. The theme is the same, however. There is a finite land resource that is in demand for a range of existing and proposed purposes. Something will have to give, and this erosion of current land uses is already well underway. If even some of the demands are to be met, then livestock numbers will reduce. Either that or stocking rates will increase on currently lowly stocked farms. That is becoming increasingly unlikely as environmental pressures demand lower stocking rates and regulatory

measures are actively encouraging this direction of travel. In relation to solar farms, it is not nihilistic to question the rationale of devoting productive land to solar energy production when the same technology can be easily accommodated on thousands of hectares of agricultural roof spaces across the country without any reduction in land devoted to food production.

## LAND DEMAND

Leaving aside the list of land uses associated with food or energy production, there is ongoing and increasing demand for land to be used for building purposes. Even the minimum requirement of 30,000 houses to be built annually for the foreseeable future will impact greatly on land availability. Much of this building land requirement is on highly productive land, simply because original settlements were established close to fertile land resources. Apart from urban and suburban land demand for housing, the ongoing development of one-off houses across the rural landscape also reduces land availability for other purposes. Then add on road developments. Despite the aspirations of the Green Party, road building and improvements will continue, adding to reduced land availability for food production. While wind farms are a contentious

development in many parts of the country, they are probably the least invasive in terms of land demand, as they take up relatively little space and are usually placed in areas of reduced agricultural potential.

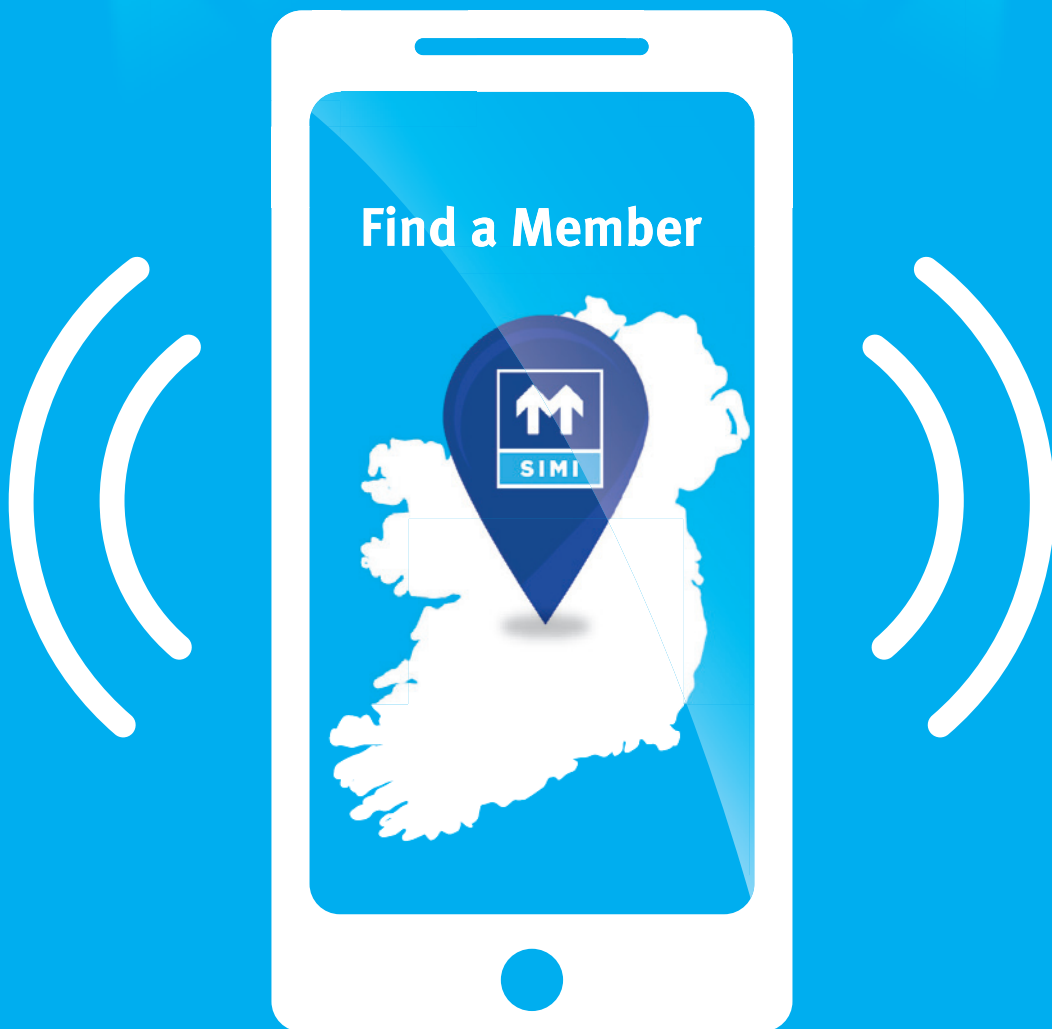
All this signals a significant reallocation in land use in the coming decades. If, and that's a big if, the ambitions for increased afforestation are met, then a further six percent of Irish land will be reallocated from existing use, in many cases away from extensive livestock farming. The ongoing drift from suckler farming is expected to continue and much of that land is likely to be reallocated to non-food production, such as energy, timber or biodiversity. The targets for an expanded tillage sector will be dependent on weather, land availability/cost and a realignment of input costs/output returns from the sector. More premium crop production may help but even the available premiums for malting/distilling/protein/food versus feed crops, will hardly be the driving force for a greatly increased acreage. At most, weather permitting, it may deliver a realignment of existing cropping patterns and acreage.

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