Agriculture, Food and the Marine Policy Programme

FIANNA FÁIL Ógra

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We are pleased to launch Ógra Fianna Fáil's Agriculture, Food and the Marine Programme. This programme expresses our vision of Agriculture, Food and Marine Industry in Ireland attractive for young people to take up not only as a profession but a vocation

This Programme contains many visionary policy proposals that capture Ógra's proposals on Agriculture , Food and the Marine.

As members of Fianna Fáil, we all aspire to fulfil the aims and objectives of the party and we are confident that these proposals will deliver strong public services, enterprise, rise to the challenge of climate change and deliver a sustainable Ireland.

Fianna Fáil have expressed strong views on Food, Agriculture and the Marine in the past. After engaging with members, our 2023 and 2024 Pre-Budget Submission set out some ambitious current expenditure proposals to address the cost of living crisis that we still face, while also calling for capital measures to support farmers to future proof their income by investing in emerging technologies. This document offers readers an expansion of those proposals.

I wish to express my deepest thanks to members of Ógra Fianna Fáil who assisted me with this document, in particular the members of the Agriculture sub-committee ; Jake Delaney, William Delaney, Jack Ryan, Aaron Galligan, Cillian Keane and Daniel Pender

Agricultural Liason Officers

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) currently has a wealth of schemes on offer for farmers to apply for. However, for many these schemes' applications can be very technical and challenging to apply for. In addition, some schemes may not suit every farm perfectly, with a risk that a farmer may spend a lot of time and resources applying for a scheme, only to be told that they are ineligible. The presence of Agricultural Liaison Officers on the ground to complement the work of bodies such as Teagasc would be a very good way to not only gather agricultural data from farmers, but to support the roll out and uptake of schemes that are most relevant to individual farmers.Liaison officers are most commonly used in Industry to work with stakeholders at a community level to broker dialogue and engagement between policy/project implementers, and those who are affected by such policies/projects.Teagasc is one example of a semi-state body that works with the public on policies proposed by the DAFM.

The DAFM's Agricultural Officers are currency office based and there is no active promotion of these officers' roles in the community by the DAFM in certain areas Major queries are arising on initiatives by the DAFM such as the ACREs scheme. While public representatives are doing their utmost to communicate with stakeholders, having specialised staff to work with the public will be invaluable to ensuring enduring stakeholder buy-in for the DAFM's multi-year programmes. The popularity of half day advice clinics that are run periodically at different venues around the country to inform farmers about new scheme changes highlight the need for a more formal structure to this popular advisory channel.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine currently hire a variety of Administrative and Technical roles. In order to implement this proposal,The Agriculture Liaison Officers' role would be an extension of the scope of the DAFM's current Agriculture Officers to engage directly with farmers more and have more availability.
Semi-state bodies such as Teagasc will also need to be engaged by the DAFM to expedite their promotion of their role and their assignments by region.

Farm Safety

Farm safety has been a key issue for the agricultural sector for quite some time. Latest statistics indicate that this sector is still one of the most dangerous in Ireland to work in. According to the HSA, while agriculture represents approximately 5% to 6% of the working population, it frequently accounts for up to 50% of all workplace fatalities and thus represents a major challenge for the sector and the Authority.
The Health and Safety Authority has published a 2021-2024 plan that gives a clear roadmap to the promotion of health and safety on Irish farms.

The plan has outlined a series of working groups. Certain schemes are being implemented via policies such as the EIP Scheme.

The principles behind the plan are to ;
- Influence
- Promote
- Regulate

Working groups and strands of activities were established by the HSA within this plan to fulfil these principles. In spite of this, there is no clear annex of actions that outlines a comprehensive implementation of the plan at either a macro or a micro level. Ógra Fianna Fáil is calling on the Department to promote the plan for farmers and its implementation at a micro level.

Direct monitoring/evaluation and support will be needed to ensure that the 2021-2024 Action Plan will be implemented. Ógra's Observation of the plan is that a more comprehensive annex of actions will be required during a prospective mid plan review in Spring/Summer 2023 to ensure that it can be baselined and benchmarked to track its targets.
As it stands, the current objectives set out in the plan are openly called out as being high-level in nature.

These working groups are currently composed of stakeholder representatives that coordinate actions. However, there is no explicit commitment to funding or direct support by the HSA or these working groups to farmers.

Ógra is therefore proposing that Minister for Agriculture Charlie McConalogue escalate dialogue with the Farm Safety Working Groups, and the Farm Safety Partnership to ensure delivery of a comprehensive Farm Safety Programme.

Emerging Technologies to tackle Climate Change

Agriculture is one of Ireland's most visible Industries globally. While Ireland's milk is the most carbon efficient in the European Union; Ireland's beef is amongst the top five most carbon efficient in the European Union. The challenge of climate change still remains and the Irish Government has set legally binding targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2030. These gas emission targets will not be easy to reach. But emerging technologies are being researched which is extremely encouraging.

Examples are listed below on next page

Anaerobic Digestion

Anaerobic digestion (AD) is the conversion of feedstock (any organic non-woody material) by micro-organisms in the absence of oxygen into biogas and digestate. Manure and other possible biomass feedstocks are inserted into a large, sealed airless container. In this oxygen-free environment, bacteria will produce biogas. In most digesters, the contents will be heated to accelerate the process. The produced biogas can be used to generate heat or electricity or both. This last option of combined heat and power (CHP) is the most common.

There has been great interest in this technology among farmers in Ireland. However, there has not been great clarity on which grant can be utilised for this technology. There is currently no clear grant available for these digestors as an individual anaerobic digestor costs up to €1,000,000.

Given the high-scale cost of these digestors, Ógra therefore believes that they should be rolled nationally at co-operative level. Every Co-Op that wishes to invest in this new modern enterprise farming could draw down a semi state grant. While options exist at many levels to secure the funding for this scheme, we believe that this grant could co nsist of half EU money and half National money. This would align green climate change policy with the EU Parliament & Commission. The breakdown in ratio of anaerobic digestor would be 50:1. Fifty farmers to one anaerobic digestor. This is broadly the ratio of general Co-Op's to farmer as it stands.

Anaerobic Digestion is a new modern way of farming. It creates an additional income stream for farmers compared to your traditional disposal of animal manure/slurry. This source of income could be a game changer for the agricultural community in Ireland as it has never been done before. It would be done on a voluntary basis but in light of ongoing nitrogen limits per hectare, this could be a way to continue reducing the pressure that farmers face to reduce nitrogen.

Multi-Species Swards

Multi-species mixtures composed of grasses, legumes and herbs provide a range of agronomic and environmental benefits in grass-based production systems. These include increased dry matter grass yield production, improved animal performance (for both cattle and sheep), increased nitrogen use efficiency, weed suppression and greater yield stability during drought events.
Studies have shown that the dry matter yield-scaled nitrous oxide emissions of a 6-species mixture was 24% lower than a grass monoculture. Perennial ryegrass swards are

highly productive under high Nitrogen input levels, with the potential to grow between 12 and 15 tonnes of dry matter per hectare in Ireland and are of high nutritional value. Multispecies swards (with grasses, legumes and herbs) can produce higher Dry Matter yields from lower Nitrogen inputs with concurrent improvements in feeding value in herb/clover containing swards Grace et al. (2019). The incorporation of specific herbs in the swards can also have medicinal anthelmintic effects on the animals, potentially lowering the usage/requirement of anthelmintics on farm.

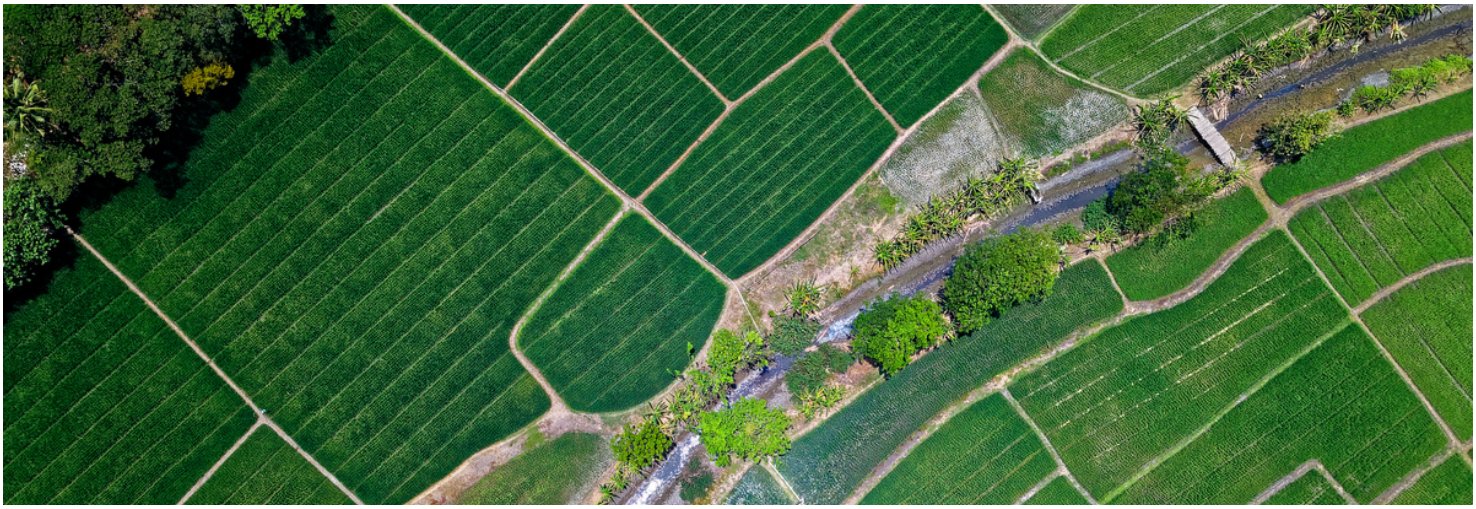
Once an applicant has been approved under the Multi Species Sward Measure a payment of €50 per 12kg bag of multi-species seed purchased (30 Kg/ha seeding rate as per existing multi-species scheme up to the approved maximum) will be made to the Co-op/Agri-retailer.

Farmers would be required to alter a percentage of their grazing platform to multi-species. This would bear the expense of seed, herbicide and potentially contractors if cultivation is required to establish the sward. Farmers will also be permitted a grant of up to €80 per hectare for introducing the sward to an area that is of optimum pH (6-6.5) for the establishment of the multi-species sward or bringing that land area to the optimum pH through liming.

Farmers would be required to attend a one day training course educating them on multispecies sward establishment methods and seed mixtures suitable to grazing type/system. Farmers would then be required to have a multi-species swards established on 10% of their farms within 2 years of the completion of the course and a tiered payment scheme to a maximum of 25% of total farm coverage will be paid for 6 years.

It is vital that farmers are briefed also on variety selection and establishment during the proposed 'training day' as they are the 'on the ground' force and explanations as to slurry application rates and conditions necessary for establishment are vital in order to ensure good crop establishment, although further, more in depth training will be completed with the relevant agricultural advisors.

The use of multi-species swards on livestock farms provides many potential sustainability benefits whilst enhancing the farm economic, environmental, and social performance. A scheme promoting the many benefits of multi-species swards in livestock farming, through the subsidisation of their establishment costs and annual maintenance grants for their upkeep will benefit the environment and protect farmers from the effects of climate change.



Vertical Farming

As the world population grows and the demand for food rises, agricultural production commonly finds itself under further pressure to increase yields and hasten production times. The world's population is expected to grow to 9.7 billion by 2050, with a vast majority of these people forecast to be living within cities and other urban areas, the construction of which may result in the loss of agricultural land. Therefore, the volume and yield that can be obtained through conventional farming methods may come under increasing strain and may require an investigation into methods of innovative food production

Vertical farming is a new concept of food production with the overall aim of increasing crop yield per area of land utilised, by farming upwards rather than vertically.

Vertical farm development units will provide a template for other farmers to follow to make better use of smaller plots of land. In urban settings, they may also be applied.

By introducing farmers to this type of farming it will nourish an innovative approach within Irish farming, particularly amongst smaller Irish farmers.

There is also potential for this to be applied to scale in urban and suburban settings. Doing so will also facilitate delivering cleaner air in these settings. In addition, this model of urban farming will facilitate the development of a stronger horticulture industry in Ireland that will reduce our reliance on imports of fresh greens. This would be especially true for produce that are currently seasonal in their availability in Ireland, like peppers, tomatoes and lettuce where there is an over reliance on imported goods from Spain, Italy, and Morocco. This was seen in February 2023 and is likely in the future according to climate scientists.

This model of farming has not been applied to a major scale in Ireland, but in countries such as the Netherlands, this is a popular model of farming that is being used. When combined with other renewable technologies like solar the associated costs of running a vertical farming unit would be greatly reduced.

To support the implementation of this model, funding could be obtained from the European Commission and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Agroforestry

The rise in popularity of agroforestry in h as been slow amongst farmers in Ireland to date, despite the fact that agroforestry has been recognised as a greenhouse gas mitigation and carbon sequestration strategy. The establishment of an agroforestry plantation has many benefits such as increasing the grazing season of land and rehabilitating poor/wet soils.

Establishing and maintaining a healthy, viable, workable soil is one of the most critical resources for the sustainability of agroecosystems.

Agroforestry, as a sustainable land management practice, has shown solid evidence of its role in improving soil quality, while limiting nutrient runoff and extending the grazing season along with other various key benefits. Agroforestry's recognition as a greenhouse gas–mitigation strategy under the Kyoto Protocol has earned it added attention as a strategy for biological carbon (C) sequestration whilst conserving and enhancing biodiversity (Ramachandran Nair et al., 2009).

The water retention and resilience of agroforestry plantations can also aid in the alleviation of environmental pressures caused by climate change such as seasonal drought and heavy rainfall in summer and winter months respectively.

The Agroforestry option of the Afforestation Scheme provides financial support for farmers to grow trees on land being used for farming.

Forestry strategy 2030 encourages EU members to accelerate the rate of carbon friendly farming practices, with agroforestry being listed as an option.

Only 18 agroforestry grant aid applications, comprising 42 hectares, have been approved and planted since 2015 (information dated April 2022 Source: Irish Examiner). Several alterations are required in order to make agroforestry a more attractive option for farmers. These alterations include:
To date, only registered foresters are permitted to submit applications for an agroforestry plantation, the authorisation of qualified farm advisors to submit agroforestry planning would lead to farmers viewing the programme as more accessible.

Acceptable broadleaf species for planting in agroforestry include oak, sycamore and cherry, with other species being considered on a site-by-site basis. The number of acceptable species should be extended to include beneficial species such as Alder which fixates nitrogen, aiding to extend the grazing season on the site and Birch which can aid in the draining and re-generation of wet sites.

Premiums are currently paid for a duration of 5 years post planting. During the initial 6 to 8 years the plantation is unavailable to large animals e.g., cattle > 6 months, this grazing restriction on the agroforestry site warrants the extension of the premium to 8 years post planting, until the land is fully viable to the farmer.

100% costs need to be afforded to the farmer along with post planting premiums. If 100% of the establishment and maintenance cost of the plantation are met, yearly thereafter premiums can be lowered whilst remaining attractive to the farmer.

Inland Salmon farming

The popularity of land-based salmon farming has increased in recent years with many countries such as Norway, New-Zealand and China who have entered into the capital markets of inland salmon farming. However, indisputable evidence now exists which clearly states that salmon lice from marine salmon farms are seriously impacting our wild fish populations.

Ógra Fianna Fáil believes strongly that there is major potential for Ireland to conduct land-based salmon farming which offers multiple benefits to both fish and the environment. The establishment of inland salmon farming will be a step towards safeguarding the wild populations of salmon and sea trout in our waters and aid in safeguarding their survival for generations to come.

However, this would mean that there would have to be a ban on the establishment of new onshore salmon farm developments. There would also have to be the creation of special tax exemptions/rebate of expenses for businesses that seek to develop a land-based farm. Licencing would also need to be reformed to cater for inland farms. We are confident that grants for businesses could be obtained from the aquaculture enterprise sector and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme. These grants are also co-funded by the government of Ireland. Further funding could be obtained under these programmes in accordance with EU state aid rules for subsidising the creation of in-land salon farms in Ireland.

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