

Changing Rural Ireland Presents New Challenges

For many farmers, diversification, entrepreneurship and innovation, both on and off the farm, are now key strategies for ensuring viability. That is according to Cathal O'Donoghue, head of Teagasc Rural Economy Research Centre, addressing the Teagasc national conference on Rural Development, entitled 'Embracing Change' which is taking place in Galway today Friday, 22 February, 2008.

He said: *"The numbers employed in agriculture are declining and there is a changing pattern of land use. Teagasc, through its integrated research, advisory and training services, is acting as an agent for change for rural development."*

He continued: *"High house prices and other factors such as improved transportation links have resulted in new settlement patterns which mean that rural areas are increasingly becoming part of urban hinterlands resulting in different land uses." "Evidence is beginning to emerge that for some rural residents, especially the elderly and those with special needs, social exclusion, lack of access to services and isolation from the communities they inhabit are increasing problems,"* he said.

Against this background he argued that the role of quality research in monitoring, evaluating, analysing, and forecasting these impacts becomes more important. Gerry Scully, head of Teagasc Rural Development Advisory Service pointed out that some 14 per cent of farmers are less than 40 years of age and for many of this new generation of farmers, the workplace was their first experience. This contrasts with older farmers whose first experience of making a living was farming, followed by off-farm work in later years.

He said: *"There is evidence to show that experience in the commercial sector has an effect on the mindset of individuals. A value is put on time and this in turn sets an expectation or benchmark as to how much should be earned from activities such as farming. This new generation has acquired business experience at a young age which has given them a confidence to seek out new ideas and implement change."*

"A typical week for many of this new generation of land owners is comprised of 40 hours working off-farm for both the farm operator and his/her partner plus a further 15 hours devoted to farming activities. Such a workload is deemed not to be sustainable by many in this group," he said.

"Reliance on off-farm jobs in vulnerable sectors such as the construction industry must be reduced. With the development of computerisation and broadband networks, rural isolation is no longer a major barrier to countryside business development," he concluded.

Teagasc researcher Mark O'Brien outlined how more than half of farm households participate in the off-farm labour market, and of those half are employed in traditional industries such as agriculture and manufacturing and the construction sector.

He warned that farm operators will struggle to secure off-farm employment opportunities in the future if they don't enhance their skill profiles. Policies will need to be implemented to assist farmers in enhancing their employability.

National Rural Development Conference 2008 - *Embracing Change*

http://www.tnet.teagasc.ie/rerc/rural_devconf_2008.htm

Teagasc National Rural Development Conference 2007

<http://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2007/20070201/index.htm>

Rural Development Conference Proceedings 2004

<http://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2004/20040330/index.htm>

Rural Development Conference 2002 Proceedings

<http://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2002/ruraldev2002/index.htm>

IFA President Launches Practical Guide To Farming With Nature

County Clare, 29th February 2008

IFA President Pdraig Walshe has launched a new reference book for farmers providing advice on nature conservation and the protection of important habitats in the context of practical farming.

‘The Living Farmland - A Guide To Farming With Nature In Clare’ includes profiles of nine farmers who have successfully incorporated environmental management into their farming enterprises. The publication is a joint initiative between Rural Resource Development (Clare LEADER), Clare IFA, Teagasc and Clare County Council.

According to Mr. Pdraig Walshe, President of the IFA, *“The Living Farmland’ is in the first place a celebration of Clare’s rural landscapes and farmlands. It is an informative and beautifully illustrated book that identifies and describes the great variety of wildlife habitats in Clare, including many which are the product of farming practices.”*

“The multi-agency partnership approach to producing the book points the way forward in how we can work together constructively to maintain a vibrant agriculture that protects and enhances the environment”, he stated.

‘The Living Farmland’ profiles the main farm habitats found in Clare, including rock, grassland, peatland, fresh water, coastal, rock, cultivated and built, woodland and wildlife corridors.

Among the topics covered by the book are hedge laying and native tree planting, the creation of man-made ponds to facilitate freshwater habitats, the management of invasive species like mink and the zebra mussel, the introduction of measures aimed at protecting species such as Lesser Horseshoe Bats and Barn Owls, and the protection of sites of archaeological and heritage importance.

The book also highlights common environmental issues confronted by farmers, including greenhouse gases, water quality and agricultural wastes, along with opportunities in renewable energy technologies.

Commenting on the background to the new publication, Ms. Dóirín Graham, CEO, Rural Resource Development Ltd., explained, *“Nowadays, much of the farmer’s interaction with the environment is bound by regulations, directives and a long list of requirements, focused mainly on what not to do. For that reason, we decided to produce a publication for farmers in County Clare, which would be informative, practical, of local interest and above all, be positive about farming with nature.”*

Ms. Graham said that the book demonstrates there are many ways to give nature a helping hand, whilst staying true to the county’s long tradition of farming.

“As signposts clearly point to a future of farming in greater harmony with nature, much can be learned from the farmers of Clare. Our hope is that the ‘The Living Farmland’ will in some way contribute to the conservation of our beautiful living landscape and all of the magnificent creatures that dwell there”, she concluded.

The farmers profiled in the new book are Shane Casey (Fanore), Christy O’Grady (Ennis), Andrew Killeen (Doonbeg), John O’Connell (Ballynacally), Brendan Considine (Kilmurry), Martin Murphy (Kilmihil), Liam Walsh (Tulla), Sean Bugler (Scariff) and Mark Donnellan (Kilkishen).

‘The Living Farmland - A Guide To Farming With Nature In Clare’ is available at selected bookshops, as well as the Clare County Council Corporate Headquarters and local area offices, Rural Resource Development Offices in Shannon and Teagasc offices throughout Clare.

For further information please contact Rural Resource Development at 061-361144 or see www.rrd.ie

Repairing Farm Outbuildings In Clare

5th March 2008

Farmers across County Clare are being urged to consider renovating farm outbuildings on their lands.

Clare County Council 's Conservation Officer said that a newly introduced grant aid scheme ensured that a number of traditional farm buildings, which contribute to the visual landscape and are of historical and architectural value, would be maintained into the future.

The Heritage Council will operate the Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme for REPS4 farmers, on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

'There is a significant gap in awareness when it comes to our agricultural heritage despite its fundamental impact on the socio-economic development of this county throughout the last number of centuries', explained Mr. Risteard Ua Cróinín.

He continued, *'It is imperative that we do not lose sight of the fact that agriculture has played a significant role in County Clare's history. The many hundreds of outbuildings located on the county's farms are a cogent reminder of this long association with the land. The scheme for REPS 4 farmers, therefore, presents an ideal opportunity to preserve these buildings.'*

Commenting on the Clare's many farm outbuildings, Mr. Ua Cróinín stated, *'Most farm buildings constructed prior to 1940 are stone structures and feature a slate, thatch or galvanised roof. Therefore, most of the buildings being targeted by the scheme range between 60 and 400 years old.'*

One of the main criteria of the scheme is whether a building improves the appearance of the landscape. The criteria also state that the quality of the proposed building works must be of a high standard. For example, slated buildings must be renovated using natural quarry slate and hydraulic lime must be used in place of cement.

'The scheme also requires that all repaired buildings must be utilised by farmers in their day-to-day work. This should be looked upon positively by farmers who will enjoy real practical benefits out of undertaking repair work on the buildings', outlined Mr. Ua Cróinín.

He added, *'Anyone wishing to apply for grant aid funding under the scheme must provide still photographs of the interior and exterior of the building in question. These photographs should focus specifically on the parts of the building in need of repair.'*

75% of the proposed works are covered by the grant scheme. Grants must cost in excess of EUR5k while the maximum grant available is EUR25k. Tax Clearance Certificates are not required for any grant under EUR10K.

Mr. Cronin said that farmers are not restricted to employing qualified tradesmen to carry out repair works. He indicated that farmers themselves could carry out work provided they had a way of valuing the work, which can be done by a quantity surveyor or structural engineer.

Mr. Ua Cróinín concluded by urging REPS 4 farmers to immediately consider costing the works associated with the renovation of farm outbuildings on their lands.

The closing date for receipt of application is Monday, 31st March, 2008. For more information on the Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme contact the Grants Office, Heritage Council, Kilkenny, at 056-7770777

<http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/>

The Organic Centre

<http://www.theorganiccentre.ie/>

ADDRESS BY

MR. TREVOR SARGENT T.D.

MINISTER FOR FOOD AND HORTICULTURE

AT THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE,

FISHERIES AND FOOD

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS VISIT TO THE ORGANIC CENTRE,

ROSSINVER, CO. LEITRIM

ON SUNDAY 16TH MARCH 2008 AT 4PM.

ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE POTATO

I am very pleased to be here today at the 10th anniversary of the Organic Centre's Potato Day. The added dimension this year is that it coincides with the International Year of the Potato.

As you know the United Nations has declared 2008 as the International Year of the Potato. The Year aims at raising the profile of this globally important food crop, giving emphasis to its nutritional attributes, and thus promoting its production, consumption, marketing and trade. A committee comprising representatives of the Industry and State Agencies has been busy putting in place a programme of activities to mark the year.

I felt it was very important, given our long association with the potato, that we should avail of the opportunity to promote the crop at all levels within our society. Therefore as part of the celebration of the International Year of the potato a number of events are being organised which reflect the importance of the potato in Irish society and history.

You are probably well aware that one of the major events being organised is a competition aimed at primary schools called Meet the spuds. Through the active support of many organisations and the organisational skills of Agri-Aware, a potato growing pack was made available to the 3,500 primary schools in the country. I am very pleased to note that 1,700 schools have to-date registered for the competition. We need to return to the basics of growing and consuming natural food and I firmly believe that Meet the Spuds competition can provide a template for future activities within schools. So whilst the competition is presented in a fun and pupil friendly manner, it has a very serious and important message.

Another important facet of the International Year of the potato is to develop an awareness of food production and healthy eating. The world is facing a number of major crises in terms of energy supplies, global warming, food security and an epidemic of chronic diseases - obesity, diabetes, heart disease and several types of cancer that are linked to the modern diet. I feel that each of us as individuals can do our bit to address these issues. I believe your work here in Rossinver in encouraging more and more people to become interested in the idea of local organic food production is making a very important contribution towards encouraging us to change our food consumption patterns as well as our lifestyles.

There is, I am glad to see, an ongoing revival of local agriculture and farmers' markets and a renaissance in regional cooking and food traditions which has started to prosper in the past few years which should contribute to getting junk food off our menus.

It is important to note the role that the potato plays in the world's food supply which is one of the main themes of the International Year as far as the United Nations is concerned. The Potato is the 4th most important crop in the world after maize, wheat and rice. Currently over 315 million tonnes of potatoes are produced worldwide with China and India now being the two most important countries of production. Potatoes can grow in a wide range of climatic conditions and thus offer opportunities to small holders in the developing world to secure their own food as well as giving them an opportunity to market it. World potato production has increased at an annual average rate of 4.5 percent over the last 10 years. While consumption of potato has declined in Europe, it has increased in the developing world, from less than 10kg. per capita in the early 1960's to over 22 kg. at present. Whilst consumption of the potato in developing countries is still less than a quarter of that in Europe, all evidence suggests it will increase strongly in the future and will play an increasing role in providing food security for many of the world's population.

Returning to Ireland, one of the other areas, which will be promoted during this year, is the conservation of heritage varieties. My own Department maintains the national collection of over 400 varieties in our Potato Centre in Raphoe, Co. Donegal. A number of local and national shows are going to display heritage varieties during the year and this hopefully will encourage the further utilisation of these varieties. I hope you enjoyed the address by Dave Langford, where he introduced his extraordinary collection of over 120 varieties of potatoes.

Dave is a member of the UN ad-hoc steering committee for the International Year of the Potato, and a passionate collector for many years of potato varieties from the common to the obscure. I wish him every success during the year in his promotion of these special varieties.

Let me also say something about The Organic Centre here and the work that it is doing to promote the organic sector within the country. I was here only last September to mark the Harvest Celebration Event and to present certificates to participants in both the "Community Food Project" and the "Building Peace through our Shared Environment" Project. The benefits of these projects are many and wide-ranging including economic, environmental, health, educational and community development. Through these Projects, the Organic Centre has actively targeted risk groups such as older people, disabled people and low-income groups and made it possible for them to access affordable, nutritious food.

I am aware that the Centre has a number of other worthwhile projects in the pipeline, including an Organic Guide, a Women's Horticulture Training Programme and the Development of an Accredited Organic 'Master Grower' Apprenticeship Scheme and my Department is delighted to support these initiatives.

I have said previously that I am very impressed by the range and the number of educational courses that are available here in Rossinver. These courses help to lay a solid foundation for the development of the organic sector.

With these excellent facilities and the commitment shown by it's students and those involved in developing these courses, the Organic Centre can continue to play a significant role in growing the organic sector in the region with particular emphasis on horticulture.

Before concluding I wish to refer to the referendum on the Lisbon Reform Treaty in June. The Common Agricultural Policy of the EU has played a key role in the development of farming and the food industry in this country since 1973. EU decisions continue to exercise a major influence on the sector. It is vital that Ireland should continue to play a full and positive role in EU decision-making, and this is especially important for the agri-food sector. Ireland has benefited from support under the CAP to the amount of EUR41billion in the period since its accession up to 2006. Continuing support will further benefit the sector as Ireland is expected to receive in excess of EUR10bn for the period 2007-2013.

The Reform Treaty provides for Ireland's voice to continue to be heard in the EU. A positive vote in the referendum on the Treaty will send a clear signal that Ireland is determined to maintain our place at the centre of EU decision-making.

Finally, can I wish you continued success here at the Organic Centre in Rossinver and I now look forward to visiting the many exhibits and gleaning more information on all the activities being undertaken here.

Clare Farmers Urged To Join New Organic Farming Scheme

1st April 2008 - Minister of State, Mr Tony Killeen T.D., today urged Clare farmers wishing to participate in the 2008 Organic Farming Scheme to submit their applications by 15th May next.

The Clare T.D. stated that the introduction of new EU regulations had resulted in a shortening of the time frame within which the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food could accept applications.

'Farmers who were coming to the end of existing REPS contracts later this year, and who intended to join the Organic Scheme, should get their applications in by the middle of next month', explained Minister Killeen.

He said, 'Currently REPS 2 and REPS 3 farmers wanting to convert to organics and join the new Organic Farming Scheme must transform to REPS 4. I am aware, however, that the Minister for Agriculture is investigating whether it would be possible to include REPS 2 and REPS 3 farmers included in the scheme. Minister Trevor Sargent has requested his Department to explore the issue with the European Commission as a matter of urgency.'

Minister Killeen added that the new Organic Farming Scheme presented an ideal opportunity for Clare farmers to make on-farm investments.

Minister Sargent Alerts Farmers to 15 May deadline for Applications for Organic Farming Scheme

The Minister for Food and Horticulture at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Trevor Sargent T.D., today urged farmers wanting to join the new Organic Farming Scheme in 2008 to have their applications with the Department by 15 May. This deadline arises from new EU Regulations governing the operation of agri-environment schemes, including the Organic Farming Scheme and REPS 4. *"The Regulations were clarified in intensive discussions between our officials and their counterparts in the Commission over the past few weeks,"* Minister Sargent said, *"and it is important that farmers who want to join the Organic Scheme this year are aware of the comparatively tight time-frame within which they must now apply."*

Minister Sargent said that farmers who were coming to the end of existing REPS contracts later this year, and who intended to join the Organic Scheme, should get their applications in by 15 May. *"Once we have the applications by 15 May we can process them,"* the Minister said, *"and farmers will be in a position to receive payment under the new Scheme during 2008."*

The new Commission Regulations also lay down rules for the way in which farmers will be paid under the Organic Farming Scheme:

Payment will be on a calendar year basis; in other words a farmer will be paid for the number of months in the year in which he or she is in the Scheme.

Payment will be in two stages. The first payment, which will be at the rate of 75%, will be released when the administrative checks (both for the Scheme itself and for the Single Payment Scheme) are completed. In practice this is likely to be early autumn.

The remaining 25% will be released when the last of the on-farm inspections for the year has taken place. This is likely to be towards the end of the year, probably December.

All undertakings will have an anniversary date of 1 January.

Minister Sargent emphasised that the new deadline and payment rules applied to all farmers joining the Scheme, whether or not they intended to join REPS 4 as well. He said that his officials would meet the organic certification bodies as soon as possible to explore the practical implications of the changes, particularly with a view to synchronising the start of new organic farmers' conversion periods as far as possible with their entry into the new Scheme.

Currently REPS 2 and REPS 3 farmers wanting to convert to organics and join the new Organic Farming Scheme must transform to REPS 4. *"To facilitate the development of the organic sector in Ireland, and to help achieve the Government's 5% target, it would be preferable if farmers could remain in REPS 2 or REPS 3 and also participate in the Organic Farming Scheme,"* Minister Sargent said. He has asked the relevant officials in his Department to explore the issue with the Commission as a matter of urgency.