

Opening Address by Minister Éamon Ó Cuív T.D. at the All-Ireland Farmers' Markets Conference

A chairde, tá fíor-áthas orm bheith anseo inniu agus ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil libh as ucht an cuireadh a thug sibh dom labhairt libh ar an ócáid seo.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be here today and I thank you for the invitation to speak at this event.

Many of our rural communities are facing the challenge of having to adapt quickly enough to meet the changing demands of our modern society, where many of the traditional ways of making a living are no longer sustainable. However, if I have learned anything in my career in public life, it would be to never underestimate the ingenuity and tenacity of the people of rural Ireland!!

While recognising that some food industries are city-based, with my Rural Development hat on, I am convinced that there is huge potential in the food industry to be part of the further development of small communities in rural areas. The continued growth, development and diversification of rural enterprise is the foundation on which we build a healthy and sustainable quality of life for all rural communities.

Healthy living and quality of life are intrinsically linked to food production. In Ireland, agriculture was traditionally a mainstay of the rural economy and food production was at its core. The professional pessimists see only doom and gloom in the fact that farming and rural economies have changed, but I know that we in this room recognise the new opportunities to do things differently with the same quality materials.

Food, as an industry, has an excellent geographical spread throughout Ireland, and because of its indigenous character it makes a very positive contribution to the rural economy and to the overall agricultural sector by creating wealth and sustaining jobs. The past few years have witnessed a growing awareness of the value of developing and marketing local resources.

Our export market for food in 2005 showed a growth of 6.4% over 2004, at a value of €7 billion. I would be confident that the figures for 2006 over 2005, due to be published shortly, will show further growth.

It's funny how things come around. In the years before mass transport and urbanisation farmers' markets were a regular feature in the Irish countryside, and were invaluable to outlying communities for the buying and selling of a wide range of goods long before there was a supermarket in each village. Today, these markets meet consumers need to purchase fresh, naturally produced local food, giving the customer a real alternative from the impersonal supermarket shopping experience. They also provide an important sales outlet for traditional, artisan and specialist food producers.

There is a need for Local Authorities and others to be proactive in relation to Farmers' Markets. The **CLÁR** programme, run by my Department, supports the joint Village and Countryside Enhancement Scheme operated by the **LEADER** companies and the Local Authorities covering small-scale infrastructural projects. The funding may be used for the establishment of farmers' markets or the upgrade of existing farmers' markets in **CLÁR** areas, with 1/3 from **CLÁR**, 1/3 from **Local Authority**, 1/6 from **LEADER** and 1/6 local contribution, up to a maximum total of €100,000. The **LEADER** groups are the coordinators for all projects and I look forward to seeing successful markets in **CLÁR** areas in the near future.

The Irish food industry is a dynamic industry, with a proven track record in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Our small food industry competes successfully on value, price, quality, convenience, choice and service. Quality products and strict standards of food safety and hygiene are imperative, backed up by a strict monitoring system, regulatory and trace-back controls. We also recognise the importance of producing quality products that meet the needs of the modern consumer. Allied to this, we adhere to the strictest standards of food safety and hygiene. The safety of the food that we produce is a constant priority and we have an extensive monitoring system and strict regulatory and trace-back controls in place, along with every link of the food chain on our Island. All of these food products are created with taste and craft, to provide a memorable Irish experience. We also have the opportunity to embrace the new foods and cultures being brought to our country by people from a huge variety of countries, produced locally, and I see farmers' markets as an ideal base for this.

Consumers enjoy the feel-good factor of buying direct from the producers at the market and they return again and again to continue experiencing the super quality and often-cheaper prices of the produce on offer, along with an opportunity for the consumer to learn more about new or different foods.

The Irish consumer is also increasingly aware that in order for food from thousands of miles away to arrive 'fresh' in Ireland, it is often packed with added salts and preservatives. There is also rising public awareness of the "Carbon Footprint" associated with transporting goods over vast distances. Therein lies an opportunity for the small food producer as an entrepreneur, the opportunity to capture the growing demand for healthy, local and natural foods.

The face-to-face nature of Farmers' markets also provides opportunities for first-class, free market research, as the producer hears suggestions for product innovation and development directly from the client – truly a win-win situation.

Finally, rural communities need to offer a different experience to the visitor or tourist to compete with urban tourism. We have an opportunity to do this through the links between regional foods and recreational tourism, and farmers' markets have an important role in attracting tourists into rural villages and towns.. There are opportunities here to drive a high-quality regional food culture where, for example, a group of hikers in from the hills can sit down to locally produced foods in a restaurant or a guesthouse. The guesthouse and B&B operators were traditionally great ambassadors for our rural tourist industry and can be again in greater numbers

if they build their business on the unique selling points of their area; be that the local food or countryside recreation or, ideally, both.

There is also, I feel, a need for protocols and a quality assurance scheme in relation to farmers' markets to ensure that food and crafts are genuinely produced locally. It is also vital that we continue to identify and address the barriers faced in this industry, to address issues of concern and to share experiences and ideas and I welcome this event today as a step in that direction.

Go raibh maith agaibh as ucht éisteacht liom ar maidin agus guím gach rath ar an obair.

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