Key Takeaways from Green Farm Panel Discussion

On the lack of significant development in the Irish biogas industry-

- The lack of an increase in REFIT is not the defining reason behind this. Indeed for food waste projects (provided food waste can be secured) the current tariff can generate healthy profits.
- The way REFIT 3 was administered (requiring a letter of offer from lending institutions) and the unwillingness of pillar banks to provide capital stymied growth, particularly in the years immediately after the crash. In addition, some developers are waiting on additional incentives before investing.
- In Northern Ireland, even when farm-based biogas plants were eligible for the best renewable electricity support scheme in the world, with only approximately one in four of plants granted planning permission has been built. This was primarily due to issues in grid connection, and to a lesser degree, in accessing finance.
- The lack of a utilization pathway for heat generated during biogas utilisation via CHP was also cited as a reason for the slow development of the industry. While co-location can address this issue, it will be a solution only in niche situation. Biomethane may be a solution to this.
- A change to the planning regime would also assist in the development of on-farm biogas plants in Ireland. A system similar to NI, where small-scale biogas plants are regarded as "permitted developments", would greatly simplify biogas plant development.

On suitable substrates-

- Food waste is a viable substrate. Plants receiving food waste could potentially operate without receiving gate fees and remain viable. However, with the additional capacity for food waste treatment in Ireland expected to increase dramatically in the next few years with the commissioning of the Poolbeg incinerator and a couple of large food-based biogas plants, the number of locations where such sites are going to be able to secure sufficient volumes of waste are small. In addition, as waste companies will not engage in long term contracts to guarantee feedstocks, financing plants focusing solely on food waste as a substrate may be challenging.
- While unviable under current REFIT, grass silage as a co-substrate shows enormous potential. Work by Teagasc and UCC illustrate that provided grasslands are managed intensively, there could be large amounts of grass available to fuel biogas plants nationwide without necessitating a reduction in bovine numbers. This could be another income stream for drystock farmers.

On grid injection of biomethane-

- Scale needs to be considered. A plant the equivalent size of a 1 MW CHP biogas plant is necessary for grid injection to be viable. The network entry facility is a financial choke point that does not really scale down.
- This scale promotes the idea of clustering of farm scale biogas plants sharing a single network entry facility.
- The development of a renewable heat incentive has the potential to drive gas-to-grid, and indeed the whole biogas industry in Ireland. The timeline for the release of this is at least 9 to 12 months away. However it will include grid injection, and will allow plants already operating to avail of the scheme.