Agriculture and Food Development Authority

TEAGASC HORTICULTURE DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

Sector Update, September 2026

The 2026 Drought and Its Aftermath:

Impact and Recovery in the Irish Outdoor Vegetable Sector

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For growers, retailers and consolidators, policymakers, researchers and other stakeholders in the vegetable supply chain

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Executive Summary

The Irish field vegetable sector including organic production faces a significant challenge managing increases in risk and costs posed by climate change. Ireland experienced its hottest summer on record in 2026, the second year running that the national summer temperature record has been broken. A severe, sharply concentrated drought through July and into August placed exceptional pressure on outdoor field vegetable production, with impacts that varied enormously depending on one factor above all others: access to irrigation. From the third week of August, the weather pattern broke down, rain returned across the country, and soil moisture has since recovered close to normal levels for the time of year. This update reviews what happened, where the sector now stands, and what the season implies for climate adaptation going forward.

Key points

- Yield and quality losses in unirrigated field vegetable crops ranged from roughly 25% to 40%, and higher in the worst-affected situations; irrigated crops generally retained substantially more of their yield, size and marketable quality.
- Irrigation came at considerable but tangible cost. The average cost was approximately €345/ha per 25mm application, with most growers broadly in line with this figure, although reported costs ranged from €230/ha to €750/ha. Carrots receiving seven to eight applications therefore incurred an indicative €2,415–€2,760/ha, while other crops receiving six to eight applications incurred approximately €2,000–€2,800/ha. These figures reflect irrigation application costs and exclude wider capital and infrastructure implications. Only around 30–35% of the vegetable production area carries sufficient irrigation capacity, and this is a key policy point in its own right: capacity is a function of equipment, infrastructure, water availability, land and soil type together, not any one of them alone, and even well-equipped growers saw it erode once this drought ran far beyond the two to three week spells it was built for.
- The drought broke from the third week of August 2026. Soil moisture deficits that had reached 70–100mm across the main vegetable-growing counties fell to close to normal levels within about three weeks, following a return to sustained, above-average rainfall.
- Recovery in the field has been strong, with some crops now producing above immediate market requirements, but this does not reverse yield already lost to poor establishment, reduced plant populations, or abandoned plantings earlier in the summer.
- The position should not be read simply as a "crop shortage" or a "crop surplus." The drought reduced production potential across the board, while the subsequent weather has created uneven timing of recovery, meaning that surplus and shortage can occur at different points in the season, and even simultaneously across different crops. The clearest risk now is disrupted continuity of supply, not a simple lack of product.
- The season reinforces a wider pattern: this is Ireland's second record-hot summer in successive years, and national climate projections point to more frequent summer drought conditions ahead. Closing the resulting resilience gap and increasing preparedness will require sustained investment well beyond what followed the last comparable drought, in 2018.
- The Teagasc Horticulture Crop Input Prices 2026 report published in May highlighted that input price inflation in the field vegetable sector continued at 4.7% during the period January 2025 to January

2026, with overall input costs having increased 77% since March 2020. Input costs for the 2026 season will be published in the next Horticulture Crop Input Prices report in early 2027

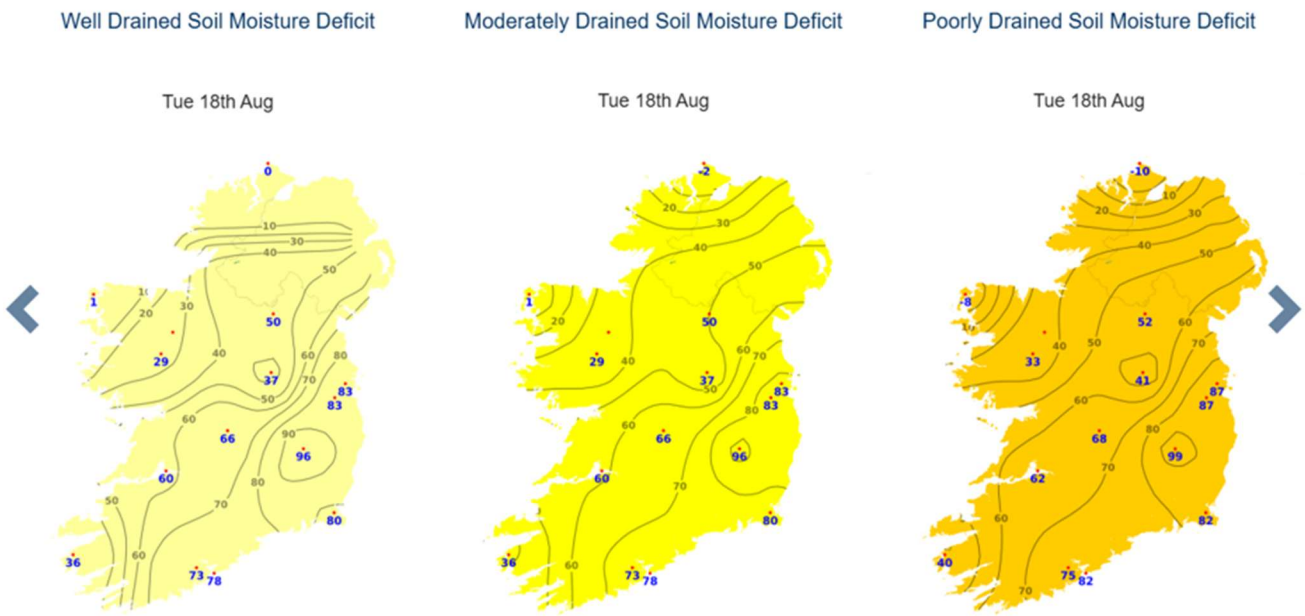
1. Weather in Review: The 2026 Drought and Its Break

Summer 2026 was Ireland's hottest on record, with a provisional national average of 16.28°C across June, July and August, narrowly above the previous record set the year before in 2025, and 2.03°C above the 1961–1990 long-term average. It was also comparatively dry, at around 78% of average rainfall nationally, the 22nd driest summer on record, though this figure understates what the vegetable-growing regions experienced.

The drought was concentrated rather than season-long. Rainfall in the first five months of 2026 was close to normal nationally, and June was reasonable too, but an almost complete shutdown of rain followed across the south and east from late June through much of August, precisely when brassica head and curd fill, and root crop bulking, need water most, and in the region that carries most of Ireland's vegetable production.

July 2026 was the second-hottest July on record, 1.87°C above average, and by late July, absolute drought (15 or more consecutive days under 0.2mm of rain) had been confirmed at 20 of Met Éireann's 25 synoptic stations, mostly in the midlands, south and east. At Oak Park, Co. Carlow, in the heart of the root-crop growing area, a partial drought that began on 20 June ran for 66 days before ending on 24 August, the longest partial drought recorded in Ireland since 1941.

At its peak in mid-August, soil moisture deficits reached 70–100mm across the core vegetable-growing counties of Dublin, Meath, Louth, Kildare, Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford, Waterford, Tipperary and Cork, a level Met Éireann classes as drought conditions. The north, northwest and north midlands sat at a milder 10–40mm, but that rainfall brought little relief to the vegetable sector, since it fell largely outside the main growing areas.



Graphic 1: Soil Moisture Deficits on the 18th of August 2026, Latest Farming Commentary, Met Éireann.

The turning point came in the third week of August, when a run of low-pressure systems ended the high pressure that had dominated the summer, bringing the south-east its first appreciable rain in over two months. August stayed warm and dry overall (the 9th warmest and 28th driest on record), but that shift was

enough to end the season's drought. Rainfall through late August and into September was well above average, with weekly totals reaching 100–355% of normal across Leinster, Munster and much of Connacht, and soil moisture deficits fell just as quickly, from the 70–100mm band recorded in mid-August to a much more typical 5–20mm across the south-east, with soils further west returning close to saturation, by early September.

In meteorological terms, the 2026 drought is now a past event: it has broken, and soil moisture has been largely restored although mild temperatures, coupled with wind, mean that irrigation is continuing over some crops in the drier eastern areas. Its consequences for this year's crop are still working through the season, as the rest of this report sets out.

	Mid-August 2026 (peak of drought)	Early mid-September 2026 (current)
Soil moisture deficit, south/east vegetable counties	70–100mm (drought)	South: approximately 5–10mm East: approximately 20–35mm
Soil moisture deficit, north/northwest	10–40mm	At or near saturation
Weekly rainfall vs. long-term average	Mostly under 50% of average	100–355% of average (Leinster/Munster/Connacht)
Longest recorded dry spell	66-day partial drought at Oak Park (record since 1941)	Ended 24 August 2026

Table 1: National weather snapshot, peak drought vs. current position. Sources: Met Éireann Climate Statements for Summer and August 2026; Met Éireann Farming Commentary and Drought Summary bulletins, July–September 2026.

2. About This Update

This report has been prepared by the Teagasc Horticulture Development Department to update stakeholders on the impact of the 2026 drought on outdoor field vegetable production, and on how the position has developed since. It builds on an earlier assessment supplied to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) in mid-August, at the height of the drought, and reflects a further round of engagement with the sector through September, as more normal conditions returned.

The assessment draws on crop intelligence gathered directly from the commercial sector: direct and indirect contact with more than forty growers across the principal field vegetable production areas, supplemented by industry and agronomic contacts. Information gathered covered crop establishment, irrigation timing and volumes, crop development, yield and quality, harvesting progress, grade-outs, crop losses, additional production costs and expected market availability, assessed against normal seasonal performance and, where possible, compared between irrigated and unirrigated crops.

This is a point-in-time industry view rather than a statistically based national yield survey. Significant variation can occur between individual crops and regions because of differences in soil type, local climate, planting date, variety, husbandry, water availability and management, so the figures presented should be read as indicative ranges based on grower and industry intelligence rather than precise national statistics. Final outcomes will become clearer as crops progress through September, October and, for overwintered crops, the winter and spring of 2027.

3. The Irrigation Divide: Cost, Capacity and Consequence

The single clearest finding from this year's drought is not about weather alone. It is about irrigation, and about what "adequate" irrigation capacity means once a drought runs far longer than normal. Most irrigation fleets and water sources across the sector are sized for the two-to-three-week dry spells growers have managed successfully for years. This year's drought ran for eight to nine weeks in the worst-affected areas, and at that length, capacity that would ordinarily have been sufficient was steadily eroded, since the same reels, pumps and labour had to keep covering the same cropped area for an extended period. Across almost every crop assessed, growers whose capacity held out for longer retained substantially more yield, size, uniformity and marketable pack-out than those whose did not. Irrigation did not eliminate the effects of extreme heat, but where it could be deployed effectively for long enough, it substantially reduced the severity and duration of moisture stress. That protection came at a considerable and highly variable cost.

The average irrigation application cost was approximately €345/ha per 25mm application, with most growers broadly in line with this figure, although reported costs ranged from €230/ha to €750/ha. The variation reflected differences in water-source proximity, pumping and energy requirements, including cases where water was pumped from a well or borehole into a lagoon before being pumped again to the field. Costs also varied with field layout, labour availability and the need to move limited irrigation equipment between fields or sites, increasing transport, set-up and redeployment time.

What counts as adequate capacity depends on several factors together: the equipment and infrastructure already in place, the water actually available to draw on, the length of the drought itself, the geographical location and soil type of the land being farmed, and, for rented ground especially, constraints a grower cannot always plan around in the way they could on land they own. A fleet correctly sized for a three-week dry spell will struggle against one that runs eight or nine weeks, however well it is managed, and this years' experience suggests the benchmark itself needs to move.

Indicator	2026 figure
Indicative cost of one 25mm irrigation application	≈ €345/ha
Estimated share of vegetable area with irrigation capacity in 2026	≈ 30–35%
Average increase in irrigation applications on irrigated crops vs. normal	≈ +178% (understates true requirement, as it excludes crops that could not be irrigated at all)
Indicative cost of 6 applications	≈ €2,070/ha
Indicative cost of 8 applications	≈ €2,760/ha

Table 2: Key irrigation cost and capacity indicators, 2026 season.

These figures represent the indicative cost of applying water and include pumping energy, labour to deploy and move equipment, machinery time, maintenance and depreciation. They therefore reflect the main costs associated with each irrigation application, although actual costs vary depending on water source, pumping requirements, equipment, labour, energy and field conditions. They do not include wider investment in additional equipment and infrastructure, or the additional crop-monitoring, harvesting, grading, packing and waste costs that can arise where drought stress reduces crop uniformity and marketable yield.

Crop	2026 irrigation observed	Indicative irrigation cost*
Broccoli	3–5 × 25mm	€1,035–€1,725/ha

Crop	2026 irrigation observed	Indicative irrigation cost*
Cauliflower	3–6 × 25mm	€1,035–€2,070/ha
Carrots	7–8 × 25mm	€2,415–€2,760/ha
Parsnips	3–7 × 25mm	€1,035–€2,415/ha
Swedes	3–6 × 25mm	€1,035–€2,070/ha
Leeks	4–6 applications	€1,380–€2,070/ha
Bulb onions	4–6 applications	€1,380–€2,070/ha
Celery	7–8 applications	€2,415–€2,760/ha
Lettuce	7–9 applications	€2,415–€3,105/ha

**Indicative cost based on €345/ha per 25mm application; actual costs vary with water source, pumping requirements, equipment, labour, energy and field conditions. Excludes wider equipment, storage, infrastructure and labour capacity costs.*

Capacity, not just access to water, was itself frequently the binding constraint. Where growers had sufficient water but not enough equipment or labour to cover their full cropped area, crops had to be prioritised, generally favouring those close to harvest, where failure to reach specification meant immediate rejection and loss, over later plantings, which were more likely to suffer delayed establishment instead. This is a live, week-to-week management decision rather than a fixed constraint, meaning the effective irrigated area can keep shrinking for as long as dry conditions persist.

This has clear implications for future resilience planning, returned to in section 8 of this report: increasing access to water alone will not deliver drought resilience unless it is matched by sufficient on-farm storage, pumping capacity, irrigation equipment, labour and infrastructure to deliver that water at the point of crop demand.

4. Crop-by-Crop Recovery Update

The following sections summarise how each crop group has fared, drawing together the impact of the drought itself and the response since rainfall returned. Except where noted, the general pattern described in Section 3 (better outcomes on irrigated ground, weaker outcomes without it) applies throughout and is not repeated crop by crop.

4.1 Brassicas: Cabbage, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Brussels Sprouts

Brassicas depend on steady, sequential establishment and development to maintain continuity of harvest, which made them particularly exposed to a drought that disrupted planting programmes through July and August. A significant proportion of Irish cabbage production has no access to irrigation.

Crop	2026 irrigation (vs. normal)	Current/seasonal yield estimate
Cabbage	Large unirrigated area	≈ 75–85% of normal
Broccoli	3–5 × 25mm (vs. 1–2 normal)	≈ 75% of normal
Cauliflower	3–6 × 25mm	≈ 75–85% (late summer/autumn)
Brussels sprouts	Irrigated crops well ahead of unirrigated	Uncertain; early irrigated crops strong

Cabbage

- Unirrigated crops saw yield and quality losses of roughly 30–40% in the worst-affected situations, with reduced head size and uniformity and some failed young plantings.
- Rainfall since late August has significantly improved growth and quality. The principal remaining concern is winter continuity, given disrupted sequential planting in July and August; the next 4–6 weeks are important for overwintered crops to recover yield potential.

Broccoli

- September crops have improved substantially since rain returned, with generally very high yielding crops evident; however, soft/spear rot has become a significant issue in some crops following the shift to wetter conditions, increasing cut and grade-out losses.
- A potential supply gap remains likely in late October if delayed July/August plantings fail to mature in time, complicated by increasing availability of Spanish broccoli as the winter supply period develops.

Cauliflower

- In the worst-affected unirrigated fields, some crops were lost altogether; where crops survived, stop-start growth increased variability and required additional harvesting passes, raising cost per marketable unit.
- Some current crops are now exceeding immediate market demand, resulting in surplus product and instances of crops being destroyed or incorporated, a clear illustration that drought-related production losses do not automatically translate into continuous market shortages.

Brussels sprouts

- Unirrigated crops failed to reach normal plant height, limiting the number of potential sprouts; improved moisture since late August has stimulated growth, but the interruption to steady development cannot be fully recovered, and size variation may increase out-of-specification product. Harvest is underway in early variety crops that were irrigated and quality is excellent.
- The principal concern is the Christmas market. Tip-burn, a physiological disorder triggered directly by the season's stressful growing conditions, requires continued monitoring; the supply position will become clearer from late October.

4.2 Root Crops: Carrots, Parsnips, Swedes, Beetroot

Root crops bulk directly in response to soil moisture and canopy size, making them highly responsive both to the drought and to its ending. Carrots illustrate the value of irrigation with unusual clarity.

Crop	2026 irrigation (vs. normal)	Current/seasonal yield estimate
Carrots	7–8 × 25mm	Promising where irrigated; 25–40% penalty where not irrigated
Parsnips	3–7 × 25mm (vs. 0–1 normal)	≈ 20–30% below normal overall
Swedes	3–6 × 25mm	≈ 75–80% of normal
Beetroot	Responds quickly to moisture at critical stages	Reduced marketable yield where unirrigated

Carrots

- Where irrigated, some crops received 7–8 applications of 25mm, an indicative €2,415–€2,760/ha in irrigation costs alone; these crops are generally showing promising yield and quality. Where irrigation was unavailable or limited, yield penalties of roughly 25–40% have been observed, with early crops particularly affected.
- Drought stress increased defects such as forking, waists, tapering, oversized and undersized roots and red/green shoulders, meaning the reduction in marketable yield can exceed the reduction in field yield. Rainfall at the end of August was timely for main-crop carrots, though severely stressed crops and poor early establishment cannot be fully recovered.
- Overwintered carrots face substantial additional cost: frost protection typically requires 85–90 bales of straw/ha (€70–€90 per bale, ≈ €5,950–€8,100/ha) plus ≈ €900/ha for plastic, before labour and machinery, meaning the case for retaining these crops through winter depends on achieving sufficient yield and quality.

Parsnips

- Difficult establishment in May was followed by severe moisture stress in July and August; where irrigated, some main crops received 3–7 applications versus 0–1 in recent seasons, a significant rise in expenditure.
- Overall yield is currently around 20–30% below normal, though some recovery remains possible over the coming weeks as rainfall improves bulking; final yield and harvesting schedules remain uncertain.

Swedes

- Early swedes were severely affected where unirrigated, with reduced root size and quality, and some bolting and brown heart observed. Main-crop swedes are now bulking rapidly following rainfall.
- The greater risk lies later in the season, particularly April–May, when storage crops are needed to maintain supply; poor winter conditions, increased losses due to greater disease risk or an early frost could substantially reduce availability during that key sales period.

Beetroot

- Beetroot's shallow root system means it responds quickly to depleted soil moisture. Common scab risk where present increased in crops that lacked irrigation especially during early stages. Recent rainfall has improved growth, but lost early growth potential cannot be fully recovered, and the main market impact is likely to be smaller, more variable roots rather than an outright shortfall.

4.3 Alliums: Leeks, Bulb Onions, Salad Onions

Allium crops struggled in different ways depending on their dependence on continuity of sowing versus direct heat and moisture stress.

Crop	2026 irrigation	Current/seasonal yield estimate
Leeks	4–6 applications	≈ 80–85% of normal
Bulb onions	4–6 applications	Very good where irrigated; ≈ 60–65% where not
Salad onions	Sequential-sowing dependent	Continuity risk rather than yield shortfall

Leeks

- Even irrigated crops struggled under the combination of extreme heat and dry conditions; early varieties saw significant bolting, with some crops abandoned. Main crops are generally behind schedule where they were unirrigated.
- Large loose-leek specifications have been particularly difficult to achieve; smaller leeks can be sold in multi-unit packs, but at lower value per plant and with additional labour and packaging cost.

Bulb onions

- Irrigated crops have performed well; unirrigated crops produced average yields of roughly 60–65% of normal. Fusarium has been observed in some crops, with rainfall returning around harvest, high soil temperatures and crop stress increasing disease risk, so careful storage monitoring will be required, since any storage losses would add to the financial impact already incurred in the field.

Salad onions

- Patchy germination during June and July reduced plant populations in some continuity sowings. Because salad onion production depends heavily on sequential sowing and harvesting, these establishment failures can create market availability issues several weeks later, and the principal concern is continuity of fresh-market supply through the remainder of the season.

4.4 Salad and Other Field Vegetables: Celery, Lettuce, Courgettes, Pumpkins

Salad crops are particularly dependent on regular moisture and irrigation, with applications increasing substantially this season because of the prolonged dry conditions, while courgettes and pumpkins have responded differently according to soil type, crop stage and access to water.

Crop	2026 irrigation	Current/seasonal yield estimate
Celery	7-8 applications	Very good where irrigated sufficiently; ≈ 85-90% of normal
Lettuce	7-9 applications	Very good where irrigated; ≈ 80-90% of normal

Celery

- Celery is normally irrigated, but crops that received insufficient water were restricted. Irrigated crops received approximately 7-8 applications, compared with 4-5 in a normal season. Early summer celery also suffered heat-stress-related blackheart, reducing marketable quality. Current and autumn crops have benefited from improved rainfall and lower temperatures and are showing more promising development, reducing the immediate supply **risk.**
- Iceberg lettuce and other major salad lines are normally irrigated as standard practice, so continuity and quality have generally been maintained better than in crops where irrigation was unavailable. Applications increased to approximately 7-9, compared with 4-5 in a normal season, depending on rainfall and local conditions, substantially increasing the cost of production.

Courgettes

- Many growers lacked either a suitable water source or sufficient irrigation equipment, leaving much of the crop unirrigated through the critical July/August period; yield to date is estimated at roughly 55–60% of normal.

- Rainfall since late August has stimulated flowering and fruit development, offering some potential for recovery through September, though production lost during July and August cannot be recovered.

Pumpkins

- Pumpkins have performed better than expected despite receiving little or no irrigation in most situations, as heavier soils in some areas retained enough moisture to sustain growth until rainfall returned in August.
- Current crops are generally promising, but the concentrated Halloween market makes timing critical: crops that do not reach sufficient maturity within the marketing window may have limited alternative value.

5. Overall Impact on Yield, Quality and Market Supply

Across crops, a consistent relationship held between irrigation availability and performance. Irrigated crops generally maintained higher yield potential, better establishment and growth, more consistent size and quality, higher marketable pack-out, better compliance with retail specifications, more predictable harvesting schedules and greater continuity of supply.

Unirrigated crops, by contrast, generally experienced:

- Reduced establishment and plant populations
- Lower yield and smaller crop size
- Greater variation and grade-outs
- Increased physiological disorders and, in some cases, disease
- Higher harvesting and packing costs per marketable unit
- Increased processing and waste
- Delayed maturity
- Disruption to sequential planting and harvesting
- Greater uncertainty around winter supply

The economic effect is consequently greater than the headline yield figures alone suggest. A crop yielding 70% of normal may produce considerably less than 70% of normal marketable output where increased variability and defects raise grade-out rates, while many production costs remain largely unchanged. The drought has, in short, increased the cost of producing each marketable unit at precisely the time when field yields and pack-out have been under the most pressure.

6. Outlook for Autumn and Winter 2026/27

The return to more normal conditions since late August has significantly improved the immediate crop outlook. Soil moisture has been restored, those unirrigated root crops are bulking, brassicas are developing more consistently, and later courgette crops have responded positively. Some crops are now producing at or above immediate market requirements, and quality in several brassica and other vegetable crops is currently excellent, resulting in some surplus production and, in places, crops being destroyed or incorporated where harvesting and marketing costs cannot be justified by demand.

This should not, however, be read as a complete recovery. Lost plant populations, failed crops, delayed planting and lost growth potential cannot be fully reversed by subsequent rainfall. The principal risks have now shifted towards:

- Gaps in supply arising from delayed or abandoned sequential plantings
- Concentrated supply where delayed crops mature together
- Reduced marketable yield because of quality and specification issues
- Higher production costs from irrigation, labour, machinery, harvesting and packing
- Reduced grower margins despite substantial additional expenditure already incurred
- Winter supply risk, particularly for Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage, leeks, carrots, parsnips and swedes
- Storage losses, particularly in onions and some root crops

- Market timing risk, including competition from imported product
- Further weather risk over autumn and winter, particularly frost and excessive rainfall

A note on how to read this

It would be a mistake to describe the current position simply as a "crop shortage" or a "crop surplus." The more accurate picture is that the drought reduced production potential across the board, while the subsequent weather has created uneven timing of recovery, meaning that surplus and shortage can occur at different points in the season, and even simultaneously across different crops. This is probably the single most important message from this update: the issue ahead is continuity, specification and timing, not a simple lack of product.

7. What This Means for Growers, the Supply Chain and Wider stakeholders

For growers

The current central issue is the substantial increase in the cost of producing each marketable unit, at a time when yield and pack-out have both been reduced. Where irrigation infrastructure, water, equipment and labour were available, growers invested heavily to protect production (in many crops, several times the irrigation of a normal dry season) and that investment has generally paid off in retained yield and quality. Where it was not available, or capacity was insufficient, the consequences have included reduced yield, quality and marketable pack-out and, in some cases, outright crop failure. Beyond the numbers, the sustained pressure, mental strain and uncertainty of this season has taken a toll on growers' wellbeing, a cost that deserves recognition.

For retailers, consolidators and other supply-chain actors

The principal issue is likely to be continuity, specification and timing rather than a simple shortage of product. Periods of surplus may even occur alongside subsequent gaps in supply as disrupted planting programmes work through the production system over the coming months. Planning for variability, rather than for a single shortage event, and building sufficient flexibility into specifications and supply programmes, will serve the supply chain better ensuring the continued supply of Irish grown vegetables.

Wider Stakeholders

The season highlights that drought resilience is multi-faceted. Effective resilience depends on adequate water availability, on-farm storage, irrigation infrastructure, equipment capacity, pumping capacity and labour to deliver water at the critical stages of crop development, a set of requirements addressed further in Section 8 below.

The 2026 season has demonstrated both the value of irrigation in protecting crop production and the significant economic and operational constraints that arise where irrigation capacity is limited. Continued monitoring through the autumn, winter and spring will be required before the full production and market impact of the 2026 drought can be quantified.

8. Climate Adaptation: The Bigger Picture

The Irish field vegetable sector faces a significant challenge managing increases in risk and costs posed by climate change. At the same time, climate change is impacting food and water security throughout Europe as well as international fresh produce supply chains. The 2026 drought did not occur in isolation. It follows the hottest summer on record in 2025 (Ireland's second record-hot summer in successive years) and sits within a run of drought-affected years (2018, 2020, 2022, 2024) that have progressively tested the water resilience of Irish farming. Drought is also only one part of a wider pattern: growers are seeing more frequent, intense extreme weather in several forms, including heavy rainfall, saturated soils and flooding, heatwaves, and storms, with Irish climate projections pointing to summers becoming drier even as autumns and winters grow wetter. DAFM's Sectoral Adaptation Plan 2025 confirms this trajectory, projecting more prevalent summer drought and more days above 25°C nationally under a higher-emissions pathway, with the sharpest increases falling on the south-east, the heart of Ireland's vegetable crop production. Although Ireland has one of the highest rates of water availability in Europe, water supplies can be under pressure when crop water demands are at a peak during the driest months especially in the drier catchment areas. This is where the sector's "heavy lifting" now lies. Many growers invested in additional irrigation capacity after the 2018 drought, but that investment was reasonably sized for a fortnight or three weeks of top-up irrigation on part of a farm's cropped area, not for the near-continuous, whole-farm demand created by a drought like 2026, where the moisture deficit sat across almost the entire growing area at once. The mismatch is one of scale, not effort, and it has already been outgrown by the scale of the risk.

The national Sectoral Adaptation Plan is a valuable framework, but it is not yet granular to field vegetable production, and this report does not attempt to resolve that on its own. What this year's experience does offer is a starting point for that conversation between growers, industry, researchers and policymakers, built around a small number of questions any field-vegetable-specific strategy will eventually need to answer, and read alongside Ireland's National Adaptation Framework (2024) and DAFM's Sectoral Adaptation Plan (2025) rather than as a substitute for them:

- Evidence and data: what a proper farm-level picture of irrigation and water-management capacity would look like, and how catchment-level intelligence on different irrigation systems, water demand, availability and abstraction pressure could be improved to target future investment.
- Investment pathways: whether water storage, irrigation and crop storage infrastructure are appropriately prioritised and whether current supports are matched to the scale of the challenge now emerging.
- Soil health and land management: how the resilience this season's better-buffered soils demonstrated, more organic matter, better structure, land recently out of ley, could be built more deliberately into future support and advice.
- Catchment-level collaboration: how growers, water authorities, local government and research bodies might plan storage, abstraction and shared infrastructure together, rather than farm by farm, and what funding routes, such as EIP-AGRI and the DAFM Thematic Research Call, could support that shift.
- Longer-term genetic resilience: what role plant breeding and newer genomic techniques could play in developing varieties better suited to drought and heat stress, as one part of a longer-term resilience toolkit alongside infrastructure and water management.

None of this is a finished answer. It is a starting list, and the sector's task now is to work through it together.

2026 was not an anomaly. It was a rehearsal, and not just for Ireland. The same summer saw more than 70% of England officially in drought, its driest July since records began in 1836, and water-use restrictions affecting an estimated 29 million people across English water company areas; France reported vegetable

losses of up to 100% on some unirrigated cauliflower, broccoli and lettuce crops. Ireland's food system leans on exactly these regions to fill gaps when domestic supply is under pressure, and that backstop cannot be assumed to hold as climate change intensifies. This is no longer a question of domestic production resilience alone. It is a supply chain and food security question, and every actor in that chain, growers, retailers, consolidators, policymakers and researchers, now has direct evidence of what happens when water becomes the binding constraint. On an annual basis, Ireland has a plentiful supply of water; the deficit is in the infrastructure to manage it seasonally in line with crop demand. The work of closing that gap must start now, while the evidence is fresh, because the next event of this scale is no longer a risk to plan for. It is a certainty to prepare for.

Sources and Further Information

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