

Development of an Irish Carbon Farming Framework informed by stakeholder engagement

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1. Introduction

Carbon Farming is an important enabler for the agriculture and land use sectors to meet Ireland’s climate targets (25% emission reduction in agriculture by 2030). As set out in the most recent Climate Action Plan (2024; gov - Climate Action Plan 2024 (www.gov.ie)), the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) is committed to the development of an enabling Carbon Farming Framework in 2024 to support the rewarding of farmers, foresters and landowners partaking in emission mitigating and carbon removal activities.

There is a need to establish a national carbon farming framework that compliments the environmental activity within for example the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 (gov - The CAP Strategic Plan 2023 -2027 (www.gov.ie)) and that is cognisant of the trajectory and requirements at EU level, within a parallel process.

A well-functioning National Carbon Farming Framework that provides confidence, verification and certification is essential to generate a potential additional income source for landowners in the actions they take to remove and store carbon in Irelands soils, forests, grasslands, croplands, and hedgerows.

The development of the national framework is guided by a public consultation launched in September 2023 (gov - Carbon Farming Framework for Ireland (www.gov.ie)) and informed by an expert advisory group chaired by the DAFM and EIT Climate-KIC, the EU’s leading climate innovation agency and community, as part of their international strategic partnership to accelerate climate-smart agriculture and sustainable food systems.

2. Public Consultation on a National Carbon Farming Framework

The objectives of the public consultation were as follows:

- ▶ Obtain feedback from stakeholders on the scope of a Carbon Farming Framework for Ireland.
- ▶ Reflect and gather insights on existing initiatives.
- ▶ Identify stakeholders who need to be involved.

3. Feedback from stakeholders

Strong farmer/forester engagement

DAFM received 457 responses to an online survey in late 2023, which asked stakeholders to provide input into the scope of a Carbon Farming Framework. The biggest response to the online survey (30.6%) came from farmers followed by farm advisers (24.9%) and then foresters (18.6%).

What should be included in the Framework?

There was broad agreement that a compensation mechanism to reward eco-systems services was needed. The responders strongly agreed that carbon removal, greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions and biodiversity measures needed to be included in the Carbon Farming Framework developed.

Governance

In terms of governance responsibility, 44% of the total replies indicated that independent body/multistakeholder group should have governance responsibility. 33% of the responders indicated that DAFM should provide the over-arching governance responsibility.

Who should pay for these services?

A great majority of respondents saw the State or the EU responsible to pay for the services covered by a national framework. The payment for services was divided with the State being indicated as a key pillar however a clear group of those taking part in the consultations believe that the costs can be shared by consumers, processors, and food producers themselves.

Readiness to join the initiative

The facility to diversify farm income was viewed by 62% of responders as a positive opportunity. However, when asked if they were willing to join an initiative right now only 53% of the consultation participants answered “yes”, but the rest would rather wait and admit that they do not know enough to be able to decide now. This is an important signal showing the scale of uncertainty and a lot of space to be developed through sensible consultation, deliberation, and information activities.

Acceptable time horizon for financing activities

It was clear from the survey that longer duration is considered more acceptable. Close to 50% of responders indicated funding of 20 years was preferred.

Principle of fairness

There was strong consensus that those who have adopted measures early must be recognised under fairness.

Forestry perspective

There was strong support for the idea that Ireland needs a Forestry Carbon Code (akin to the UK Woodland Carbon Code).

Feedback from an open Question

Feedback from the open question was robust, with plenty of constructive ideas and critique. Many people left contact details, which is very helpful from the perspective of building a community of users for the implementation phase of that framework. The consultation provided an invaluable resource of stakeholders to invite for more in-depth discussion.

The following organisations were consulted in subsequent meetings:

Irish Farmers Association, Irish Grain Growers Group, Irish Environmental Network, Irish Cattle and Sheep Association, Irish Organic Association, Environmental Protection Agency, Bord Bia, Meat Industry Ireland, Dairy Sustainability Ireland, IrBEA and Teagasc.

4. Consensus on the overall Objective and Purpose of the National Framework

The public consultation process and stakeholder engagements have shaped the overall objective of this framework, which will be to support and enable the adoption and scaling of management practices within primary production systems. This will enable Ireland achieve its climate, biodiversity and water quality targets by the end of 2030 and attract additional investment into the agri-food sector to potentially support primary producers (farmers, landowners and foresters) for the ecosystem services that they provide.

The purpose of the Framework will be to:

- ▶ Define the principles under which a National Framework for Carbon Farming to support ecosystems services will operate in Ireland. For example, governance, permanence, additionality.
- ▶ Set the rules for what ecosystem services will be measured and the protocols for measurement that must be followed in order to achieve certification, with the aim to harmonise multiple ongoing initiatives.

- ▶ Attract additional investment into the agri-food sector to pay primary producers (farmers, landowners, and foresters) for the ecosystem services that they provide.

Set out the next steps for development of Carbon Farming.

5. Future research needs

Funding Opportunities for research/pilot programmes (ongoing)

Throughout this process, extensive funding has been in place supporting activities on the ground through the Innovation Fund, the Common Agricultural Policy, the Regional Development Fund, the LIFE programme, the Climate Fund and the Horizon Europe programme (including the Mission ‘A Soil Deal for Europe’). However, additional funding is needed to develop Carbon Farming further.

Communications and knowledge transfer

There is a significant knowledge gap amongst farmers, landowners, and agri-food stakeholders around the topic of carbon farming as it is a new and developing area. As a first step, it would be useful to develop a “knowledge transfer strategy” around the carbon farming demonstration. This could include specific actions identified around the launch of the DAFM carbon farming framework, delivery of the pilot phase, launch of the main phase and engagement with all stakeholders etc.

Acknowledgements

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References

gov - Climate Action Plan 2024 (www.gov.ie)
gov - The CAP Strategic Plan 2023 -2027 (www.gov.ie)
gov - Carbon Farming Framework for Ireland (www.gov.ie)