

Teagasc National Dairy Conference 2024

Wednesday 27 November 2024

Opening remarks by Teagasc Director, Professor Frank O' Mara

You are all very welcome to the annual Teagasc Dairy Conference, entitled **Robust dairy farming for future challenges**, here in county Limerick.

After a very tough year in 2023, 2024 was in some ways another difficult year for dairy farmers, albeit it is ending on a good note. Bad weather in the spring and summer led to a challenging year for grazing and for conserving winter fodder with cumulative grass DM Production **8%** lower than the five year average. Milk price has improved as the year went on. Input costs remain high, albeit lower than we saw after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All in all, 2024 should see good recovery in dairy farm incomes from the lows of 2023. Our economists will present their estimates for 2024 farm incomes and their projections for 2025 next week (3 Dec).

2024 was also the year that most dairy farmers had to farm with a lower maximum stocking rate of 220 kg organic N per ha. Many dairy farmers had to adjust their system by renting or buying extra land, exporting slurry, contract rearing or reducing stock numbers. CSO provisional data for June 2024, showed a 1.4% drop in dairy cow numbers compared to June 2023, the first time this number has decreased since 2010. When coupled with the poor spring/summer weather, we saw a reduction in milk production, which will probably end some where around 2% for the year, which would have been much worse only for the very strong backend. It is that weather pressures can have a huge impact on the farm business. As a result of climate change, Met Eireann projects that there will be increased frequency of extreme weather events in the future. A recent climate adaption conference we held heard that farm systems will require extra feed buffers to ensure that the business can withstand the increased frequencies of weather events.

As we speak, additional controls on chemical nitrogen fertiliser usage, coupled with changes to the organic N of a cow depending on the crude protein of the concentrate offered, as well as changes to organic N output of young stock, are under consideration as part of the review of the current Nitrates Action Programme (NAP). 2025 will be a very important year, with Ireland making its application for a new NAP and a renewal of the derogation. Central to this case will be the data on water quality. Pat Dillon will present an important paper today setting out the current status of our water bodies as well as recent trends. Earlier this year, Teagasc launched a major advisory campaign to improve water quality, BETTER Farming for Water – 8 Actions for Change, at the request of the Minister. In this campaign, we will build on existing initiatives and work in partnership with industry and other organisations, adopting a Catchment approach. In his paper, Pat will outline this Catchment approach, and will also outline the most important actions that dairy, drystock, tillage and pig farmers can take to improve water quality.

Adequate slurry storage is one of these important actions which allows for good nutrient management and avoidance of impact on water quality. The first year of a study requested by the Department of Agriculture, Food And the Marine, (DAFM) and led by Teagasc researcher Pat Tuohy to provide new estimates of slurry and soiled water production on dairy farms has been completed. If these first year results were to be adopted, slurry storage requirements would increase by approximately 20%, while soiled water storage requirements would increase by approximately 33%, outside of allowances for rainfall runoff. The measurements will be repeated this year. This is obviously a very significant finding. In this regard, the new proposed Nutrient Storage Investment Scheme, recently announced by the Minister would offer 60% grant aid with a separate TAMS 3 funding ceiling of €90,000, and is a very important opportunity for farmers to put additional slurry storage on your farms. We are awaiting the Terms & Conditions to see the full details.

Of course I recognise the difficulty for making investment decisions with the uncertainty of the derogation renewal, and every farmer must make his/her own decision. We are very conscious of the importance of the derogation for the incomes of thousands of farmers, and many others working in the industry. We are currently working on an Environmental and economic modelling study

to ensure that the impact of any adjustment in the maximum stocking rates permitted under Ireland's Nitrates Derogation is well understood. We would hope to complete this study, which is being carried out at the request of the DAFM, by March next year, and will publish it then.

Turning to greenhouse gases, good progress is being made in reducing emissions. The EPA reported that emissions from agriculture fell by 4.6% in 2023, and that trends indicated a further drop of 2.4% in Q1 2024. While this is partly due to lower numbers of cattle, and lower milk yields/cow in 2023, it is important to recognise that the actions of farmers have had a big effect. Chief among these are the reduction of 30% in chemical nitrogen usage over the last 2 years and the switch to protected urea, which in 2024 made up about 27% of straight N usage, and together these are responsible for almost 1mT/year reduction on CO₂-e emissions. Clover is a big part of our advice to farmers who wish to reduce chemical N without impacting on grass production. Some farmers were disappointed with the performance of clover in the early part of this year. Over 15 years or more, Teagasc has researched the role of clover, and indeed multi species swards, in dairy systems at Moorepark, Clonakilty, Ballyhaise, Solohead and Johnstown Castle. We have accumulated a large bank of data on which to base our advice, from across different systems, sward types, soil types and agro-climatic conditions. To ensure we are getting the most from these data, that our advice is consistent with the research, and to identify the areas we need to focus on in future research, we are commissioning an external peer review of our clover and Multi Species Swards work, and we hope to receive the report by the end of Q1 2025. This will help to ensure we maximise the potential from the research programme and help to identify gaps where further research is required.

During the year, some farmers expressed disappointment with the grass growth response they got to protected urea. However the research data is clear that there is no difference between Protected Urea and CAN as a source of nitrogen, and Patrick Forristal will present these results during today's conference. For next year, we will regularly publish the grass growth results of ongoing measurements of protected urea versus CAN trials being carried out at Moorepark and elsewhere. We will also have a strong campaign around fertiliser spreader calibration and settings next year, as this is very important

for good results. A good quality granule is also important for spreadability, and the industry will work to ensure the product available is of high quality.

2024 saw the publication of the 10 point action plan to support dairy calf to beef systems in Ireland. There is great potential to increase profitability of both dairy and beef farmers through greater alignment between both sectors. Indeed there has been great progress made in the past 3 years in relation to increased use of sexed semen, coupled with greater use of high DBI beef AI. This is just the beginning of this journey and it should be seen as an opportunity to add value and profitability to both beef and dairy businesses. Teagasc will continue to support this process and indeed we had an excellent scientific conference a few weeks back which will help in this process. Sexed semen usage will be covered in the workshops.

A key challenge facing all sectors of the agricultural industry is generational renewal. The Irish economy is at full employment and there are many opportunities for the children of tomorrow outside of agriculture. It is my personal opinion that many of these opportunities are not as fulfilling as a career in agriculture and in particular in dairying. The Minister for agriculture established the Commission on Generational Renewal a few weeks back, where Teagasc is represented. Teagasc will be active participants and we will continue to research ways that reduce labour requirements, add value to work completed, increase the attractiveness of careers on dairy farms as well as developing models for progression and creating career structures for all participants in a dairy farm business.

There is no doubt that dairy farming is facing many challenges, but it is important to remember the positives that it does consistently provide the highest per hectare income of any of the main farming enterprises, we have a globally competitive production model, and you produce a top quality product that is sold in high value markets throughout the world. Our conference today has a number of very interesting and important papers in the morning sessions, and is followed by a selection of workshops in the afternoon, all aligned to our topic of **Robust dairy farming for future challenges**. I want to thank all the speakers and workshop facilitators, which includes farmers,

Teagasc researchers, specialists and advisers, and external speakers, and also the chairpersons for today. I also want to thank the Organising committee of Joe Patton, Padraig O Connor, Eithne Gowan and the dairy specialist team the local advisory and admin team from the Kerry Limerick region, led by Majella Moloney, and finally thank you for coming here today and for your support throughout the year.