

Establishing attitudes to small scale indigenous forestry plantations among dairy discussion group farmers in south Wexford

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Abstract

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The objective of the study was to establish dairy discussion group farmers' attitudes to small scale indigenous forestry. It was undertaken in the South County Wexford area using a combination of focus group meetings and key informant interviews.

The study found that the farmers and key informants were generally very much in favour of small scale indigenous forestry plantations on their farms but with conditions. Some of these conditions were that credit (in the form of a carbon positive figure) should be given for all the trees, hedges and habitats already on farms, while additional carbon credit should also be given for any farm that undertakes the proposed small scale forestry initiative. It was also mooted that the planted areas should be eligible for basic payment scheme (BPS) and other scheme payments. Most farmers agreed that if the main costs, especially fencing, were covered then they would not be looking for much more financial support than that.

The key informants expressed great concern for the policy side of the considerations and were adamant that the process of granting permission/licenses would have to be both simplified and fast-tracked for the initiative to gain traction and ultimately succeed. They also felt that if handled properly there was huge potential to raise the overall national planting area if a sufficient number of farms got involved, even with only 1ha per farm planted. In their opinion, education and practical demonstrations were also key elements of a successful programme.

The goodwill of the farmers can be earned by giving them more control over the initiative and especially by giving credit for the biodiversity and carbon contributions of the trees planted. If the policy makers really want to get farmers on board then they need to consider giving carbon credit for the existing stock of trees, hedges and habitats, etc.

The study recommends that a change of mind-set is needed all across the dairy industry including advisors in order to make the necessary changes. Short termism is a big problem among dairy farmers and their advisors and is understandable due to the high financial investment and subsequent returns that are needed. This is not good for the environment, however, and delays the long term focus and changes that are needed to make sustainable changes for future generations.