

Meet Teagasc Director Frank O'Mara

Director of Teagasc Professor Frank O'Mara was appointed on 1 October 2021. He grew up on a farm at Lisronagh near Clonmel in south Tipperary and has lived in Carlow for the last 30 years.

Frank, can you tell us about your career background?

"I studied agricultural science in UCD and after graduating in 1987, I spent two years working for Charles R. Wynne, grain and agricultural merchants. I applied for a position as a PhD student at Teagasc Moorepark and I loved the four years I spent doing that research.

"I then spent 13 years at UCD, first as a postdoctoral researcher, then as a lecturer in animal nutrition and animal production. In 2006, I joined Teagasc at Oak Park, Carlow, as assistant Director of Research and became Director of Research in 2009."

What do you see as the biggest challenge for agriculture?

"It's no exaggeration to say that climate change is the biggest challenge facing not only farmers but all of human society. Teagasc has a huge role to play in creating a pathway that includes technologies and farm practices which will enable farmers to reach climate neutrality while maintaining food production and farm incomes. Teagasc is carrying out the research to help develop these solutions and our advisors are supporting farmers to implement them."

Are farmers expected to solve climate change?

"I can understand why farmers sometimes feel that way! But other sectors of the economy such as electricity generation, which must move to renewable energy sources, transport which must switch to electric vehicles, the building industry, which must use new materials and techniques and manufacturing also face enormous challenges. Consumers, too, face huge changes to their lifestyles."

Can we reach the targets?

"The Teagasc plan for greenhouse gas reductions is based on the MACC (Marginal Abatement Cost Curve),



which lists the potential of actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It was produced in 2013 and updated in 2018. The challenge now is to support farmers to implement these actions and develop additional actions through research.

"The new Signpost farm programme will play a key role in bringing farmers, advisors and the industry together to collectively address the challenges.

"Our grass-based livestock systems are a good starting point. DAFM, the industry and Teagasc have been promoting grass-based rather than

high-input systems for many years, on the basis that they were the most likely to deliver good farm incomes and be resilient to the ups and downs in milk and meat prices. Fortunately, they are also good on greenhouse gas emissions.

"Systems which rely heavily on human-edible food such as grains to produce meat or dairy are less sustainable. We produce animal products from grass, which we can grow very well, but which is not itself human food."

» Continued on next page

Can technology help farmers to meet these challenges?

"Some technologies are already available. Low Emission Slurry Spreading, for example, is helping both livestock and tillage farmers use organic manures more efficiently.

"Ensuring optimum soil pH and incorporating clover in our swards are not new ideas, but we must increase their usage on farms. Clover and other legumes make fertiliser from the nitrogen in the air, reducing the need for fertilisers manufactured using expensive natural gas.

"In the short-term, we will continue to use some mineral nitrogen, particularly by embracing protected urea, which releases fewer greenhouse gases than other types.

"Teagasc researchers are investigating dietary supplements for livestock which will reduce methane emissions. But we can also reduce lifetime emissions from animals by finishing them younger. Obviously, we must develop systems that still give target carcass weights, and don't flood the market with cattle at one point in the year.

"In the medium-term, we will be breeding animals that are naturally lower emitters of methane. It will take some time for such animals to reach farms, but breeding will certainly be helping to combat climate change.

"We can only tackle climate change targets effectively, however, if every farmer plays a part – it can't be seen as someone else's problem."

Is Teagasc now focused solely on climate change?

"Not at all. Teagasc aims to add value for all farmers and farm enterprises and we have a holistic view of sustainability, which includes economic, social as well as environmental sustainability. We support farmers with production technologies, but also with farm business management decisions.

"Beef and dairy are the two big sectors of Irish agriculture and we will continue to support those enterprises, but we will also support farmers looking for diversification options.

"In the EU Farm to Fork strategy, organic production is targeted to triple by 2030. As part of that, the Irish Government has committed to increasing organic production to 7.5% of land area and Teagasc is providing increasing support to the sector. Of course, we must be careful that markets for organic produce are developed too.

"Farm forestry has grown from a low of about 4% to 11% over the last half century. Some of these forests are approaching maturity and our



Director Frank O'Mara welcomed tillage farmers to a recent Open Day at Teagasc Oak Park.

Up-close

- **Best advice:** "Growing up, I loved farming, but my parents, urged me to get a third level education. That's still excellent advice, even if you plan to return home."
- **Home background:** "My parents had a small mixed farm. They had dairy cows and beef cattle at different times. They also had some tillage, usually feed crops."
- **Interest in sport:** "I have a great interest in hurling, particularly the Tipp county team, and also Gaelic

football and rugby, but I get to fewer matches than in the past."

- **Most recent book you've read:** "*Troubled Blood* by Robert Galbraith. I enjoy a long crime thriller with a complex plot."
- **Favourite film:** "I am a fan of the Daniel Craig *James Bond* films, and always enjoy Clint Eastwood westerns and his recent films such as *Gran Torino* and *The Mule*."
- **Other hobbies:** "We do a small bit of farming and after a long day, it's great to go and check on the stock or do a few jobs."

forestry researchers, specialists and advisors will help farmers to extract value from their forests by optimising the harvest and marketing of timber. We will also encourage farmers to plant trees in appropriate locations.

"There is currently a review of the horticulture sector taking place. We have great growers in Ireland, but our small home market and the comparatively small scale of our industry means competition from imports is always strong.

"The Teagasc horticulture depart-

ment is supporting fruit, vegetable and mushroom growers. We are in the process of recruiting a new fruit researcher to focus initially on the apple sector.

"Farm business management is essential, particularly when margins are tight. Teagasc has developed some excellent tools to assist farmers – our Profit Monitor program has recently been upgraded and is providing excellent insights on farm financial data.

"In addition, of course, Teagasc has a huge Food Research Programme

and we are active in supporting stakeholders right along the food chain.

What advice would you offer to new entrants to farming?

"Coming from a farming background myself, I understand the passion that many young people have to farm.

"Farming is a great business, but it is a tough life. You need to work smart as well as hard, particularly when prices are weak. A part-time job off-farm is necessary for many.

"On the plus side, there will always be a need for food production and prices for most commodities are currently strong and hopefully that may be part of a sustained upswing. Not all sectors are benefiting and pigmeat prices are currently very low. This is exacerbated by high input costs, which are affecting all sectors. But without doubt, farming is a very fulfilling way to make a living.

"I advise young people planning to farm to get an education and accumulate technical and business skills. Teagasc currently has over 6,000 full-time, part-time and distance learners.

"Students in our colleges usually complete two years to Level 6, which includes practical work and skills training, as well as placements on farms. Teagasc graduates have the opportunity to progress their education further at Technical Universities (formerly Institutes of Technology) or other education providers.

"I advise young people about to begin farming to become part of a series of networks. This will include family, neighbours, farm discussion groups, industry etc. I would strongly encourage new entrants to maintain a relationship with Teagasc, as we can offer support or advice in all areas of the farm business."

What would you say to farmers who are within sight of retirement?

"Teagasc's role is to serve all stakeholders and we must be aware of what they need and the circumstances in which they are operating. The average age of farmers is now in the high 50s and for many, inheritance and succession issues are increasingly relevant.

"Events that we run in this area enjoy huge attendance and interest. Teagasc aims to support farmers in making these decisions and also to support the new generation as they take over production.

"There is a big drive towards digital technologies and communication in Teagasc and we will certainly leverage digital technology to become more effective and efficient. We will use it to make life easier rather than more difficult for farmers and we will not leave farmers behind just because



Athy farmer Fred McCann with Teagasc Head of Crop Knowledge Transfer Michael Hennessy and Teagasc Director Prof Frank O'Mara.

they are not keen on going digital.

"For example, many clients prefer face-to-face contact or paper-based communication rather than digital and we will respect their wishes.

"A key area in my opinion is that of health and safety. Teagasc is working with others to promote physical and mental health and safety among all farmers."

What will be the long term impact of COVID-19?

"COVID-19 brought a lot of tragedy to Irish families. It also created a revolution in how people do their work and remote working is now a viable alternative for many. Rural communities may benefit, as people do jobs from rural locations and spending power remains in the locality.

"For Teagasc, digital events, webinars and digital conferences proved effective during the pandemic and I imagine future events will be a blend of digital and face-to-face contact. There is no perfect substitute for meeting face-to-face and we have a list of major events in 2022, including open days for sheep at Athenry in June, beef at Grange in July, dairy in Ballyhaise in July and soils and environment in Johnstown Castle in August.

What other challenges do you see for Teagasc and farmers?

"Though it is still being finalised, the new CAP, which will start in 2023, will certainly be a challenge for farmers and advisors. We are already planning how our advisors can support farmers to ensure they comply with the administration of the scheme and benefit as much as they can.

"Another key issue will be to work with farmers to ensure we are producing food in the way the consumer, at home and abroad, wants. That includes lots of factors, from prioritising animal welfare, enhancing biodiversity and avoiding pollution of waterways, as well as reducing greenhouse gases.

"So production systems and farming businesses will evolve, but there is nothing new in that. I would like to assure our clients and all farmers that we will work tirelessly to support them. We have a unique advisory service with dedicated and talented staff, whose mission is to support their farmer clients, and I would hope that farmers will continue to support and use that service. When combined with our education and research services, we have excellent people and resources to support farmers to deal with challenges as they arise."

—Mark Moore