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Kevin O'Hanlon is one of the 70 fully organic dairy farmers operating in the country. As farm manager of the Marie Pascale-Pollard farm in Ballywilliam in Wexford, Kevin has overseen the organic conversion over the past two years.

"We've seen profits, biodiversity and work life balance improve while at the same time the farm's greenhouse gas emissions have dropped by almost a quarter," he says.

While the farm officially applied to join the Organic Farming Scheme in April 2021, Kevin had really started the conversion to a different way of farming in 2019. Having spread almost 100t of chemical fertiliser in 2018, he says he began his quest to see if he could reduce the farm's fertiliser usage.

He reduced chemical fertiliser to 69t in 2019 and to 36t in 2020, before eliminating it completely in 2021. Cow numbers only dropped by just over 10% over the same period. There are currently 155 cows being milked on the 130ha farm, compared to 175 cows before the organic conversion. The milking platform extends to 59ha.

Multi-species swards

"The key to maintaining cow numbers on this farm while simultaneously eliminating the fertiliser bill is our incorporation of legumes and, more specifically, clover; via multi-species swards, onto the farm," says Kevin.

There is a legume growing in every field with the exception of the 4.4ha of fodder beet, but as Kevin commented at a recent farm walk: "There is plenty of clover growing in that too!"

The whole crops all contain peas as the legume source and most of these are under-sown with multi-species swards, so there is a living bed of clover very visible at the base of these crops too.

Another key feature is Kevin's ambition to grow more of the farm's feed requirements. Prior to organic conversion, he was purchasing 1.2t of concentrate per cow. This is now reduced to 0.6t. "I estimate that the cows are receiving a total of 1.2t each of concentrates in their diet when the home-grown grain and the grain contained within the arable silage are included," he says.

Table 2 (see page 34) outlines how milk output has fallen by 25% over

A conversion experience

Kevin O'Hanlon has seen profits, biodiversity and work-life balance improve – and emissions cut by 25% – since converting a Wexford farm to organic dairying



Kevin O'Hanlon is farm manager of the Marie Pascale-Pollard farm in Ballywilliam, Co Wexford

the past four years.

This is due to a combination of three factors: fewer cows, a reduced level of meal feeding and an increased volume of milk being fed to calves.

In organic dairy systems, all calves must receive whole milk for their first 90 days. For many farmers, this drop in milk output would be enough for them to slam the brakes

on the thought process surrounding potential organic conversion. But the truth is that this is only part of the story.

In Table 2 we have attempted to estimate what the financial scenario



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(in 2023) would have been had this farm continued as a conventional farm, similar to how the farm was farmed in 2018. While the litres sold have fallen, the price received has increased.

Kevin started supplying Glenisk last May and is currently receiving 45 cents per litre (cpl) for his milk. This price is a flat rate and there is no bonus for milk solids. Glenisk pay a summer rate for seven months and a winter rate for five months.

Last winter, that price was 70cpl, and 60cpl the winter before. Taking all this into account, Kevin is estimating a conservative average milk price of 50cpl in his figures, factoring in that the farm was selling its milk conventionally for the first four months of the year.

“By eliminating the chemical fertiliser bill and reducing the meal bill we have offset most of the financial loss in milk sales,” says Kevin. “When you allow for a reduction in milk replacer purchases and an increase in paperwork costs, the reduction in costs fully offset the reduced milk cheque.”

Increased profits

All cows are housed on cubicles (as permitted by organic standards) so the straw bill has not increased. When the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) payment is added in, you can see that this farm is financially better off by approximately €29,000.

But this only tells one third of the story. The sustainability stool has three legs and in a truly sustainable system, these legs are of equal length.

Kevin has demonstrated that this farm is financially sustainable, but what about the other two legs, social and environmental sustainability?

Social sustainability is essentially the measure of one's quality of life or the work-life balance. Since organic conversion, many of the workers on the farm have managed to take an extra day off per week. “I can't precisely fully pinpoint why I have more time, but I find I have much more time off the farm than previously,” says Kevin.

What about environmental sustainability? Plant diversity has increased significantly, primarily due to the multi-species swards.

When asked what he defines as a weed, Kevin answers “anything the cow doesn't eat” and adds that since he stopped spreading chemical fertiliser, the cows Hoover up docks.

We know from recent research at Teagasc Johnstown Castle, that more

Table 1: key farm statistics 2020 to 2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Cow Numbers	175	162	157	55
Other LU's	98	79.6	78	81
WF Stocking Rate (LU/Ha)	2.1	1.85	1.80	1.81
MP St. Rate (LU/Ha)	2.97	2.75	2.66	2.62
Milk Solids/cow (kgs)	560	526	436	480*
Total litres sold	1,234,009	1,050,225	900,000*	900,000*
Fertiliser purchased	36	0	0	0
Meal purchased/cow	1.2	1.2	0.8	0.6

Table 2: 2023 Conventional Vs Organic scenarios

	Conventional	Organic
Cow Numbers	175	155
Litres sold	1,234,000	900,000
Milk Price	43cpl 2.1	50cpl
Milk Sales	€530,620	€450,000
Fertiliser Purchased	98t	0
Fertiliser Cost/Ton	€600	n/a
Total Fertiliser Cost	€58,800	0
Concentrate feed purchased/cow	1.2	0.6
Cost of feed/ton	€430	€800
Total feed Bill	€85,140	€74,400
Milk Replacer	€12,375	0
Paperwork/licence fee	0	0

Table 3: crops grown on the Pascale-Pollard farm in 2023

Crops grown in 2023	(Ha)
Grass Clover Swards	36.6
Red Clover Swards	4.8
Multi Species Swards	54.9
Whole-crop (grain)	8.9
Whole-crop (silage)	20.6
Fodder Beet	4.4

Table 4: estimated financial impact of organic conversion 2023

Reduced Milk Sales	- €80,620
Reduced Costs	+ €81,915
OFS Payment	+ €27,700

diversity above the ground equates to more soil biology diversity below.

Kevin says he has noticed an explosion in earthworm numbers on



More money, more time off, more diversity and GHGs slashed by a quarter – perhaps there is room for a few more organic dairy farmers in this country

this farm, especially in the multi-species swards.

Red clover fields are humming with increased numbers of insects, bees and butterflies, and Kevin has also noticed a considerable increase in the number of buzzards on the farm.

At an organic farm walk in July on the Pascale-Pollard farm, Teagasc climate change advisor, Colm Doran, estimated that this farm has reduced its GHG emissions by 25%.

More money, more time off, more biodiversity and GHGs slashed by a quarter. Perhaps there is room for a few more organic farmers in this country?

ORGANIC DAIRYING: FACTS, FIGURES AND TIPS



‘Do the financial projections, but also factor in the social and financial benefits’

There are approximately 70 fully organic dairy farms in the country and a further 30 undergoing conversion. There are four organic milk processors: Aurivo, Glenisk, The Little Milk Company and The Village Dairy.

Milk prices range from 45cpl to 70cpl (May 2023). Bottled milk makes up a large percentage of the processing capacity followed by yoghurt and cheese.

Three of the processors are involved in bottling milk and require year-round supply. The Little Milk Company processes all its milk into cheese and therefore will accept a spring calving system. Many of the organic spring calving farmers operate a once-a-day milking system.

The average stocking rate of organic dairy farmers is 1.5LU/ha. Farmers

with high percentages of their farms under clover and other legumes are achieving whole farm stocking rates of 1.8LU/ha. Organic farmers are not permitted to exceed 2LU/ha.

Cubicle beds are permitted for housing as long as they are a minimum of 2.62m² each and that each cow has access to 3m³ of total lying area within the house. As a practical example, this could involve housing 70 cows in a cubicle house with 80 cubicle spaces.

Cubicle beds must be bedded at all times. Most organic farmers use a mixture of (untreated) shavings mixed with cubicle lime for this purpose.

The cost of purchased concentrate when purchased from a miller is close to double conventional feed prices. This can lead to significant meal costs, especially for winter

milk producers.

Many organic dairy farmers reduce this cost by purchasing directly from organic tillage farmers. Combinations crops (a 2-3 way mix of a legume; pea or bean mixed with grain; barley; oats or wheat) are the most commonly traded feedstock.

When averaged over a 5–10 year period, organic milk prices tend to be 15-20% ahead of conventional milk prices. The Organic Farming Scheme will pay organic dairy farmers €350/ha in the first two years of organic conversion and €300/ha thereafter.

They will also receive a participation payment of €2,000 in year 1 and €1,400 thereafter. “If contemplating organic conversion, do financial projections, but also factor in the social and environmental benefits,” concludes Kevin O’Hanlon.