



ORGANIC DAIRY FARMING

Introduction

Organic dairying is a relatively small but growing sector within the dairy industry in Ireland.

It offers an excellent opportunity as a profitable enterprise option, but success is dependent on you having a good interest in organic methods and having a market price secured for your milk. Important issues include grassland management, winter feeding, housing and cow health. For full interpretation of the rules and regulations governing organic dairy farming, it is

essential to study the 'Organic Food and Farming Standards in Ireland' document, which is available from the organic certification bodies (OCBs) – the Irish Organic Association (IOA) and the Organic Trust.

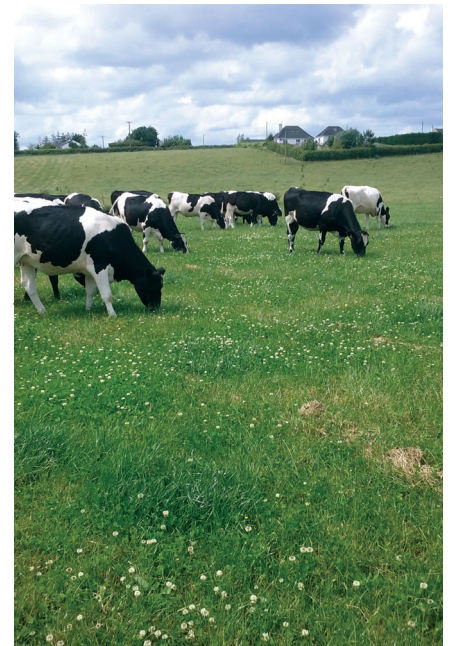
The market for organic milk looks positive and is growing globally. Presently, most milk is supplied domestically. There are a number of established commercial dairies handling most of the organic milk. Demand exists for both summer and, in particular, winter milk.

Profitability

Organic dairy farming compares favourably to conventional systems. Typically, organic dairy farmers are stocked in the region of 1.4 LU/ha and therefore, require access to more land compared to the average conventional dairy farmer. On a return per litre basis, some of the most profitable dairy farmers in the country are farming organically. This is clearly in evidence at Teagasc/Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) organic demonstration farm walks. Maintaining high output levels, coupled with lower production costs, and achieving a premium market price for milk contribute to higher margins on organic farms.

Organic conversion period

Grass-based farms go through a 24-month conversion period on the land, during which time it must be managed to full organic standards, but milk cannot be supplied to an organic market. The cows must be managed to full organic health and welfare/housing standards. Animals must be fed to full organic standards (100% feed from organic sources) for at least the last six months of conversion. Note: from the conversion start date, all feed must be genetically modified organism (GMO) free.



Average stocking rate is in the region of 1.4LU/ha.

Breed type

Breed choice, just like for the conventional farmer, is down to personal preference and what suits your farm the best. Important factors to consider for organic dairy farmers are the market demand for volume vs milk solids (fat and protein), and exploring with the processor any bonuses that may be available for the latter. The capacity of the animal to adapt to local conditions, their resistance to diseases and your ability to grow quality grass-clover and other legume-based forages for feed are important factors which should also be considered.

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Housing and bedding

More space is generally required over conventional standards. In organic farming, animals must have access to a bedded area. A 100% slatted area is not permitted. Cubicles are also permitted but they must have dry bedded material on top of the cubicle. Rubber mats alone on cubicle beds are not a substitute for bedding. Straw (conventional is permitted), sawdust (untreated), and woodchips for bedding of animals are permitted.

Animal health

An animal health plan is prepared by your veterinary surgeon and submitted as part of the conversion plan to the organic certification body prior to conversion. In essence, animals are treated if a treatment is required but under more formal arrangements. Withdrawal periods may have to be doubled or trebled under organic

standards. For mastitis, antibiotics can be used in clinical cases with permission from your vet, and where no other treatments would be effective. Two courses of antibiotics within 12 months are permitted, otherwise the cow is removed from the milking herd.

Replacement heifers

On conversion, permission may be sought to source replacement heifers from non-organic farms up to a maximum of 10% of the herd size or in special circumstances, up to 40% of the herd size, e.g., in the latter case, a major extension of stock on the farm, breed change or new livestock specialisation. Therefore, prior to conversion, prospective organic dairy farmers are advised to source appropriate breeds of livestock that are required for breeding purposes on their organic holding.

AI and use of a bull

Organic farmers are permitted to buy a bull from a non-organic farm for breeding purposes. Use of artificial insemination (AI) is also permitted. Sexed semen is permitted once the semen is not chemically separated.

Weed control

As all herbicides are prohibited in organic farming, weed control must be achieved by management practices and mechanical methods. Maintenance of good levels of soil fertility and appropriate soil pH, regular topping, and rotation of silage and grazing ground can help achieve good control. A dense, well-managed sward will minimise infestation since seedling weeds are poor competitors to grass-clover swards.

Feed

As 100% of the feed must be from organic or in-conversion sources, you need to ideally produce all your feed from the farm. Organic grain and compound ration is fairly widely available. Prices for organic concentrate feed are generally around double the price of conventional. Contact details of where to buy organic feed may be found on the OCB websites.

Soil fertility

Good clover swards (especially white clover for grazing and red clover for quality silage), and targeted use of lime, farmyard manure and slurry mean that coping without chemical fertiliser can effectively be managed. Soil fertility inputs that are commonly imported onto organic farms

include:

- lime;
- cattle slurry from another grassland-based farmer (either organic or conventional farmer; derogation farm source >170kg N/ha is also permitted);
- organic and/or free-range chicken manure;

- dairy sludge from an approved dairy processing plant; and,
- certain mineral sources of fertilisers, e.g., ground rock phosphate and basic slag.

Note: organic manures from factory farms including commercial pig and non-organic or non-free-range chicken farms are not permitted.

Further information

For further information please contact your local Teagasc advisory office.

The following resource is also helpful:

🌐 www.teagasc.ie/organics

Other useful fact sheets in this series:

Steps to Organic Conversion
Organic Cattle and Sheep
Organic Horticulture
Organic Cereals
Organic Poultry

www.teagasc.ie/ruraldev

