

Cork Environmental Forum

Position Paper 14 - Sustainable Agriculture and Food Production



This Paper is based on widespread consultation during two Sustainable Agriculture workshops hosted by CEF in Millstreet and Bantry during 2002. While recognizing that agriculture has provided the economic backbone of rural areas for generations, economic, social and environmental changes require a thorough re-appraisal of the ways forward for farming and food production systems across the County. The need to support community regeneration and the sustainable management of rural resources requires the widest possible debate.

Background

Agriculture is the strategic economic sector responsible for the stewardship of rural resources. Food production is vital for human nutrition, health and well-being. County Cork possesses some of the richest farmland in the country, especially for dairying, yet many farm holdings struggle to make a living on some of the more marginal land, particularly in West Cork. The problems and opportunities for farming in the region can be best understood in the context of the basic principles of sustainability.

Resources are used efficiently and waste is minimised by closing cycles.

The agricultural sector is a significant consumer of resources such as fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, electricity, water, plastics, and diesel fuel. It is a significant generator of waste, principally animal manures and dirty water from dairy operations.

🌱 The regional farming organisations must enhance efforts to reduce resource use and waste generation across all these areas by measuring such activity and setting achievable targets for reduction.

While most organic wastes are spread as slurry on agricultural land, proper nutrient management is still inadequate.

🌱 All farmers / land owners in receipt of Government / EU support payments should prepare and implement a Nutrient Management Plan for their landholdings, similar to those currently applied in areas covered by County Council by-laws. These Plans should be prepared within three years, with full recording, and review after five years.

Pollution is limited to levels that natural systems can process without damage.

Raised levels of nitrates and phosphates from the agricultural sector have contributed to the eutrophication of water resources in the County.

Air-borne pollution is also a significant issue, with agriculture responsible for one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions in Ireland. Enteric fermentation in cattle and other livestock generates over 30% more than all road traffic when compared on a CO₂ equivalent basis.

- 🌱 **In order to meet our international obligations under the Kyoto Treaty a significant reduction in the size of the national herd will be necessary. The reduction in stocking densities of agricultural land will enable more extensive and diverse farming with less environmental pollution.**

Natural Diversity is valued and protected.

This requires a means of encouraging and rewarding farmers who take steps to conserve and protect hedgerows and other natural features that provide important habitats for wildlife. The Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) has been the principal means for achieving this sustainability principle. In the Cork region, the uptake has been ## However, there are large intensive farms which could contribute to the protection of natural habitats in the region were they able to avail of individual components of the REPS.

- 🌱 **Teagasc and the Farming organisations should encourage more small-farmers to join REPS, and seek a menu-based version of REPS for large intensive landholdings.**
- 🌱 **The drainage and reclamation of marginal land should cease and the burning of hillsides should be strictly controlled.**

Local needs are met locally where possible

Increasing numbers of consumers are purchasing local food that offers assurance of freshness, traceability and quality. The growth in the number of Farmers' Markets and the expansion of Country Markets across the County is evidence of this. Such initiatives indirectly promote Import substitution, reducing the large proportion of food from imported sources consumed in the region.

- 🌱 **The Local Authority should proactively encourage the establishment of Farmer / Country Markets in the larger towns of the Region, and the revival of Agricultural Shows particularly where they have declined.**

Good food is available to all at reasonable cost.

County Cork is home to some of the finest food produced in Ireland today and its quality is underpinned by its provenance. There is a national and, increasingly, international market for the farmhouse cheeses, smoked fish and meat products produced by food artisans in the region. There is also increasing interest in and support for high quality local food (Slow Food Convivia in West and East Cork, the Cork Free Choice Group).

- 🌱 **Regional branding needs to be proactively promoted together with incentives for farm-gate sales and contracts for direct food supplies to urban consumer groups.**

Satisfying work in a diverse economy is available to all.

Farming as an occupation has become less attractive in recent years with depressed farm incomes, the BSE crisis, consumer anxieties over food quality, and improved off-farm career prospects for young people. The inheritance and maintenance of viable farm units by sons and daughters has become problematic as it lies at the heart of a sustainable agricultural sector supporting a range of rural livelihoods. Re-establishing fulfillment in agricultural work is linked to building a wider range of skills and knowledge derived from economic diversification at farm level, and new ways of adding value to farming activities.

- 🌱 **Stewardship of the countryside and management of the rural landscape are vital roles performed by farmers and landowners, who must continue to be supported through direct payments, particularly those smaller producers in isolated areas with family needs.**

- 🌱 **Farmers need to be increasingly aware of the economic benefits of involvement in rural recreation and tourism. They should be included in discussions that allow for improved access to land, primarily along designated routes, as has happened in creating the Sheep's Head Way and the Seven Heads Walk.**
- 🌱 **Part-time farmers must be facilitated by their employers in job-sharing, flexi-time work arrangements, and holidays to suit the farm calendar.**

Good health of the community is protected.

Food production is vital for human nutrition, health and well-being.

- 🌱 **Organic Food production, resistance to GMO produced food and Traceability of food products all need to be enhanced within the Cork Region through various agencies including Teagasc, Farming Organisations, SW Regional Authority, Leader, Bord Bia, Supermarket chains, and the producers themselves.**

Environment is not damaged by access to facilities, services, goods and other people.

For the agricultural sector, an awareness of the adverse impacts of excessive food trading is slowly developing. The issues of fair trade work both ways. Cheap meat imports into the region threaten the viability of local producers, while cheap exports of dairy produce from the region to developing countries can threaten small-farm viability there.

- 🌱 **The Cork Region should promote fair-trade policies in agricultural produce trading through the relevant agencies.**

Skills, knowledge and information are accessible to all.

Education about the realities of rural life and farming is lacking throughout the community, particularly in the school system and in urban areas. Rural isolation is also an increasing social problem. Measures to tackle both these issues could be mutually beneficial and help promote the Agri-Aware scheme. The culture of rural life needs to be rediscovered and celebrated.

- 🌱 **Agriculture and Environment curricula in National and Secondary schools should be urgently developed. The success of initiatives like the Stream Scapes project must be built on.**
- 🌱 **Tours to farms, discussion groups, lectures, visits to research farms and horticultural operations need programming by Teagasc, ADM and other agencies.**

Participation in decision-making is extended to the whole community.

While farming groups have effective representation to national policy making, it is less clear how they influence regional and local policy decisions in the County. There appears to be an absence of effective decision-making capacity involving full local participation on matters of local significance, for example in relation to designating walking routes across farmland or in relation to changes in land use (conversion of farmland to housing land).

- 🌱 **The South West Regional Authority, the County Development Board and the County Planning Policy Unit need to effectively involve the farming organisations in all policy-making that affects rural regeneration. The up-coming Local Area Plans must reflect the real concerns and aspirations of rural communities throughout the Cork region.**

Local distinctiveness and character are valued and protected.

Farmers and landowners have a key role as stewards of the countryside in helping to achieve this goal of sustainability. Since the majority of Cork's landscape lies outside any designation system it requires a cooperative and informed effort by all stakeholders to maintain its quality.

 **Farmers and landowners should be encouraged, supported and advised to continue in this role, through involvement in community-based efforts like the Bantry Bay Charter and the IRD Duhallow Development Group.**

Proposed Targets:

Current number of farmers in REPS in Co. Cork, on 1/5/03 was 2803. Including 88 in Organic REPS.

Propose doubling number of farms under REPS and quadruple those in organic REPS by January 2007

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To foster, promote & implement sustainable development within the Cork region