

Organic Cattle / Sheep Production



Introduction

Organic produce is one of the few expanding markets in the food and farming sector. This expansion is consumer driven. The greatest demand is for fruit and vegetables but this follows through to a much wider range of products, i.e., dairy products, meat, processed foods etc. Market surveys in Europe and all over the world show a huge scope for expansion in organic produce.

Organic farming is a system, which avoids the use of soluble fertilisers, pesticides, growth regulators, feed additives etc. The organic farmer relies on crop rotations, animal manures, clover, low stocking rates and good animal husbandry. The natural immunity of plants and animals are relied upon whenever possible as a way of combating disease. The tillage farmer and vegetable grower aims to have a high level of organic matter and a high level of biological life in the soil. As “quick fix” solutions are no longer an option, the standards of husbandry required are quite high. The rules for organic farming are set out in the standards. These standards have been developed by organic associations and are now given recognition in E.U. law (Regulation EEC No. 2092/9).

In practice this means that the term “organic” now has a technical and legal meaning which gives a guarantee to the consumer that the produce conforms to organic standards. A buoyant world-wide market exists for organic produce. The market for organic food in Europe is growing at a rate of over 20% per annum. Ireland can not afford to ignore a niche market such as this.

Market

A number of organisations have made a major effort over the years in developing a market for organic beef and lamb, i.e. Shannon Development, Good Herdsman . Irish Country Meats, AIBP, Shannon Region Organic Meat Co-op and North West Organic Producers Group. Good herdsman and Martin Jennings, Wholesale Meat suppliers, Ballinrobe are offering a premium of 20% for organic beef and lamb. The UK is now the fastest growing market for organic food. The export market for beef and lamb for Ireland has good potential. But a consistent supply of good quality product would need to be available. 90% of the beef produced in Ireland is exported. We cannot afford to ignore markets with good potential.

Production Methods

To sell produce as organic and avail of the price premium, one must go through a two year conversion period, i.e., you must be farming to organic standards for two years and be a registered member of an organic association. There are three organic associations operating in this country, i.e., IOFGA, Organic Trust and Demeter. Many farmers in a suckler/sheep system could easily adjust to organic standards. A farmer considering the organic option should look at the following aspects of his system:



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This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

*All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website
<http://www.teagasc.ie/>*

Edited by:

**John Whiriskey
Paul Mc Carthy**

Teagasc
Mellows Development
Centre
Athenry, Co. Galway.
+353 (0) 91 845200

Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources.

- ♦ **Stocking Rate:** A stocking rate of 1 to 1.4 Lu's/ha is suitable for organic farming.
- ♦ **Soil Fertility:** It is easier to farm organically where soil fertility is medium to high. Rock phosphate has been used successfully on organic farms.
- ♦ **Livestock System:** Suckler cows and sheep are suited to organic farming. Under good husbandry natural immunity to parasites and diseases can develop. A grazing system which reduces the worm burden should be established.
- ♦ **Clover:** Clover is essential at higher stocking rates. A good clover stand can double pasture production, grass quality and animal performance is improved.
- ♦ **Tillage:** Some tillage is a major bonus. It provides cheaper grain and straw and allows the renewal of grassland. From 2008 only organic cereals can be fed to ruminants.
- ♦ **Housing:** The conventional straw bedded sheep house conforms to organic standards. In cattle housing a straw bedded lying area is essential (*the feeding area may be slatted*).

Many farmers in a suckler/sheep system could easily change to organic standards. If they were already finishing cattle and lambs they could readily avail of the premium prices.

Economic Returns

In organic farming stocking rates are lower but the cost of concentrates and straw will be higher. Cattle housing built to meet REPS requirements and organic standards will also be more expensive. The area eligible for organic payment has been increased in REPS 3. Farmers on 40 to 55 ha. Are now eligible to receive substantial payments. An outline of payments is shown in the following table:

Supplementary REPS Payments for Organic Farmers

Size of holding	Up to 3 ha* (1 ha + vegetables)	3 ha – 55 ha	>55 ha **
In conversion	€242/ha	€181/ha	€30/ha
Full organic status	€121/ha	€91/ha	€15/ha

** Rates in previous column apply up to 55ha

Total Payment on Organic Farms in REPS

Area	Basic Payments	Organic Payment – In Conversion	Organic Payment – Full Organic Status	Max Payment – In Conversion	Max Payment – Full Organic Status
20 ha	€4,000	€3,620	€1,820	€7,620	€5,820
40 ha	€7,500	€7,240	€3,640	€14,740	€11,140
55 ha	€8,550	€9,955	€5,005	€18,505	13,555
85 ha	€8,550	€10,855	€5,455	€19,705	€14,305

Accounts from organic cattle/sheep systems have shown that when REPS payments and premium prices are combined with good farming practice the profits can be substantial.

Produced by: John Reidy, Teagasc, Athenry, Co. Galway, Ireland.
Email: john.reidy@teagasc.ie ☎ +353+91 845200