Organic beef production in Ireland: structure and steps towards successful conversion

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Introduction

Organic production is defined as “an overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes”.

Consumers purchase organic food for a number of reasons including:
• concerns about the build-up of chemicals in the body,
• taste,
• a return to traditional food values,
• animal welfare and
• impact on the environment.

After recession related decline, the organic market in Ireland and the UK has stabilized and has returned to growth. Irish organic food enjoys an excellent reputation both at home and especially across Europe. Latest figures show the organic retail food market in Ireland is now worth over €136 million annually (source:Bord Bia, 2016) which represents approximately 1% of all food sales. In the European Union, the market for organic food is worth €24 billion (2014) a doubling in size over the last 10 years. The largest markets exist in Germany (€7.6 billion euro), France (€4.8 billion), the UK (€2.3 billion) and Italy (€2.1 billion). This growth represents an opportunity for Irish farmers to supply more organic food, especially organic beef.

At farm level in Ireland, the organic sector has experienced a large influx of new farmers in recent years with 1,800 farmers now farming organically including approximately 600 who entered conversion in 2015. About 70% of organic farmers are cattle farmers. Organically managed land now occupies approximately 2% of the total utilizable agricultural area (UAA) in the country, which is over a doubling in area compared to the previous decade. This compares with an average of 6.2% of UAA across the European Union.

Organic beef farming in Ireland

According to DAFM, in February 2017 there were approximately 1,400 organic cattle farms in Ireland, most of whom were suckler farms. In total there were over 59,000 cattle, including 18,500 suckler cows, farmed organically. This represents an increase of 65% in cattle farms and an increase of 100% in cattle numbers since 2008. Figure 1 shows the location of all organic farmers and location of cattle per county in Ireland. Figure 2 shows the number of organic cattle disposals in 2012 per month through factories, abattoirs and exported live. In 2012, there were over 9,000 organically farmed cattle slaughtered in Ireland by approximately 500 farmers.

With the relatively large influx of new organic farmers entering conversion in 2015, it is expected that these cattle disposal figures will rise by about 40% by 2018.
Figure 1: Location of all organic producers in Ireland - February 2017

Figure 2: Organic cattle disposals through factories, local abattoirs and exported live per month in 2012. Annual total = 9,000.
Is organic beef farming profitable?
There is a perception that organic farming is difficult, contains a lot of ‘red tape’, is demanding on labour and returns low levels of productivity. The reality is quite different. The best organic farmers, using good husbandry and management skills, can achieve stocking rates up to 170 kg N/ha. In terms of paperwork, detailed records must be kept but farmers in the Bord Bia Quality Assurance scheme and GLAS are already familiar with this type of record keeping.

Steps to Successful Organic Beef Production
1. Get the information
It is important that you get as much information as possible before making the switch to organic farming. Prospective organic farmers should first consult with their agricultural consultant or advisor to determine suitability. This should be followed by attending some of the Teagasc/DAFM Organic Demonstration Farm Walks to see organic production systems at first hand and to meet with other organic farmers, staff from the Organic Certification Bodies, the organic unit of the DAFM and Teagasc advisors/specialists. There is a wide variety of publications, advisory guidelines, research updates, videos, event/course details along with links to relevant organic bodies and organisations available on www.teagasc.ie/organics.

2. Assess the market
For organic farming to be profitable a premium price must be achieved for produce sold. While the majority of beef supplied to the market is from steers and heifers, recent markets have emerged for calves (organic veal) and cull cows. Beef farmers interested in organic conversion should speak with other organic farmers, processors and wholesalers about potential markets. Major factory outlets for organic beef are Goodherdsmen, Slaney Meats, ABP and Jennings. Premium prices of 15 to 20% have generally been achievable for organic beef in recent years. According to processors the demand for Irish organic beef will continue to rise, especially in mainland Europe.

3. Maximise payments from the Organic Farming Scheme and other supports
Consult with your agricultural consultant or advisor, or the DAFM website (www.agriculture.gov.ie) about scheme and grant support available for organic farming. An organic farming scheme (OFS) which is an area-based payment and both an on-farm (OCIS) and an off-farm capital investment scheme is funded under the new Rural Development Programme (2015-2020) and opens up at various stages throughout the programme.

4. Complete an organic course
A 25-hour ‘Introduction to Organic Production’ course has to be completed before acceptance into the DAFM Organic Farming Scheme (OFS).

5. Choose an organic certification body (OCB)
In Ireland, there are three certification bodies (Demeter, IOFGA or Organic Trust) which certify organic operators involved in land-based farming under the auspices of the DAFM. The farmer initially applies to one of the three certification bodies with the application form, conversion plan and fee payable. Once the application is accepted, a conversion date is granted and a conversion period (normally 2 years) commences. The Organic Certification Body carries out an annual inspection to check compliance with the standards and to ensure that organic records are in order. Spot inspections may also be carried out to check for compliance with organic regulations.

6. Complete an organic conversion plan
This involves a detailed description of management practices on the farm, the changes required on the farm, soil analysis, faecal analysis, livestock housing plan, animal health plan (in consultation with your veterinary surgeon) and land/crop rotation plan. The plan can be drawn up by the farmer alone or in consultation with the farm advisor. Attending a FETAC accredited “Introduction to organic farming course” is an excellent way of learning how to complete the conversion plan.
7. **Provision of quality forage**
To maintain farm productivity, stocking rate must be maintained as high as possible. In the absence of artificial nitrogen, white clover may be introduced into pastures to maintain grass production levels. White clover is the 'engine' that drives productivity on organic farms and can fix in excess of 100 kg N/ha annually. Red clover can fix in the region of 200 kg N/ha annually and can be a high yielding, high protein feed for wintering animals. Organic concentrates are more expensive than conventional concentrates. Prices for organic rations for ruminants are generally around €500/tonne. Maximising use of grass, using home-grown grain, purchasing grain from other organic producers and having the correct breed and system which matches land type and market specification required can reduce feed costs significantly. Organic straights can be purchased from a variety of organic farmers for between €300 and €350 per tonne with combi-crop mixes of peas and a cereal available for between approximately €380 and €400/tonne.

Regular topping is necessary to maintain grass quality and control weeds particularly in mid-season. High quality silages can also be produced using red clover-grass swards and enough silage should be produced on farm to meet winter feed requirements as it is not permitted to source silage from conventional farmers.

8. **Animal health**
Ensuring high animal health and welfare standards is a fundamental ethos of organic principles. The farmer must be aware that the level of stockmanship required with animals is very high on organic farms. Routine treatment of animals with anthelmintics is prohibited, and a rotational grazing system should be in place to minimise worm burden. If a problem occurs faecal analysis is recommended and the vet must sign off the appropriate treatment on the organic farmer’s record book. Early detection of animal health problems is essential. Remember good animal husbandry is paramount. If an animal is suffering it must be treated and the necessary permission must be sought from the vet. The animal health plan, produced as part of the conversion plan, will deal with mineral deficiencies and vaccination issues.

9. **Animal housing**
Many farmers find that the greatest alterations that need to be made at farm level are changes to winter housing. More generous space allowances are required – for cattle the rule of thumb is that 1.0 m² is required for every 100 kg live weight. All stock must have access to a dry bedded lying area. Up to 50% of this area can be slatted but the rest must be solid floor and not slatted. Conventional straw may be used for bedding.

10. **Nutrient recycling**
Maintenance of soil fertility levels depends on the creation of a sustainable system which balances inputs and outputs without relying on external inputs. Good clover swards, crop rotation and targeted use of farmyard manure and slurry mean that coping without artificial fertiliser can be managed effectively. Farmyard manure needs to be put back onto grassland areas designated for grass silage production, which is rotated around the farm, and slurries needs to be applied at the most appropriate time using methods that ensure maximum recovery of the nutrients. Certain slow-releasing natural mineral sources of fertilisers are also permitted. Ground limestone is permitted as are certain commercial ‘bagged’ lime products provided they are approved by an organic certification body.

11. **A helping hand**
Whether you are thinking about converting, a recent organic convert or an experienced organic farmer there is no end to the learning involved in organic production methods. It is important that you get as much information as possible about best practices that suit your own farm situation. There is a wide variety of publications, advisory guidelines, research updates, videos, event/course details along with links to other relevant organic bodies and organisations available on [www.teagasc.ie/organics](http://www.teagasc.ie/organics)