

No farm? No problem! Advice on new pathways into dairy farming

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Summary

- Milk quota removal and the resulting expansion have created exciting and varied career opportunities on dairy farms in Ireland.
- There is a variety of employed career roles available on Irish farms from part-time relief work to full-time assistant or management positions.
- There is also a growing number of progression opportunities via leasing, partnerships or share farming arrangements.
- Key to having a successful career in dairying is having the skills needed to farm effectively.

Dairy farming in Ireland is changing rapidly. The national dairy herd averaged 1.44 million dairy cows in 2018 (+400,000 cows or +38% since 2010) and over half of these cows are milked in herds of >100 cows. Teagasc expects that if the national dairy herd increases to 1.6 million by 2025, approximately 6,000 people will be needed to enter the industry to work on larger scale dairy farms and to succeed farmers who plan on retiring. This increase in the number of larger scale farms has and will continue to create both opportunities for employment and progression in Irish dairying. The most important resource available to any business is its people, and there are exciting opportunities for people with the right skills and work ethic to be successful employees or farmers.

There are a number of other factors along with increased herd size creating opportunities in dairy farming. These include:

- Future demand for dairy products: The long term projections is for the demand for dairy products to continue to grow, based on a growing world population and the increased westernisation of diets in developing countries. Ireland, with its grass-based system of milk production, is well positioned to capitalise on this growing demand.
- Profitability of dairying compared to other enterprises: The 2018 e-profit monitor figures show that the average dairy farmer made a net profit of €1,590/ha. The top 25% of farmers made €2,500/ha (This figure excludes subsidy income along with a charge for the farmers own labour, tax and capital repayments). This is far in excess of what was achieved in other enterprises.
- Increased interest in collaborative farming models: There is a large and growing interest in this area. The creation and subsequent success of the Macra Land Mobility Service, which has facilitated the change of land use of over 47,000 acres in five years is evidence of the strong interest of Irish farmers in collaborative farming. Successful business arrangements involving farms that have been converted to dairying and also existing dairy farms which have been reinvigorated by the addition of a young, enthusiastic and skilled person are now in operation.
- Long term leasing tax incentives, can allow a farm owner to receive up to €40,000/year without paying income tax (if leased for 15 years). This is increasing land availability to skilled farmers.
- Average age of farmers and lack of successors. The 2016 CSO data showed that 30% of Irish farmers were aged 65 or over and more than 50% of farmers are 55 or older. In dairying, 16% of farmers were aged 65 or older. Macra surveys have identified that

50% of farmers over 50 also have no identified successor. Hence Irish farming is facing a lack of successors and a shortage of people with the necessary skills to take on the running of farms. If farmers have no successor, many may consider employing labour or entering a collaborative farming arrangement in the future to continue in dairying.

A rewarding career

For the first time in a generation, there are now exciting opportunities and a career progression framework in place on Irish dairy farms. You no longer have to own a farm, or even be from a farm to be a successful dairy farmer; the key requirement is the skills. Whether someone is interested in an employed position or owning their own stake in a farming business, there are many reasons to consider a career in dairying such as:

- the opportunity to earn a good income and have a good work life balance.
- the variety of work, lower living costs and commute times when living in rural Ireland.
- the opportunity to work both on your own and as part of a team while using the latest science to try and improve farm performance.

It is possible to start from a non-farming background and become a successful dairy farmer (there are multiple examples farming today) but it can be challenging. Having an excellent support network, saving effectively, developing a strong work ethic and developing good people skills are some of the key ingredients for success.

Skills required

Key to having a successful career in dairying is having the skills needed to successfully fulfil each career role. Education (e.g. the Teagasc Advanced Dairy Certificate and Dairy Farm Management Diploma) combined with relevant work experience on different farms with employers who take an interest in their employee's learning are the best ways to develop the skills needed for successful farming.

Conclusions

There are exciting career opportunities in Irish dairy farming. Key to success is developing the grass, cow, people and business skills required.

