

tillage

Challenges and opportunities for potato growers: a Donegal perspective

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Growing a commercial potato crop is not for the faint-hearted with 2020 production and storage costs in the region of €3,800 per acre (€9,390 per hectare) excluding land rental. On top of that, potato growers have to contend with other significant challenges annually including:

- Weather conditions from planting through to harvest.
- Market and price volatility.
- Blight control.
- Loss of pesticides.

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Other unknowns such as the long-term effects of COVID-19 and a deal or no-deal Brexit will bring additional challenges and/or opportunities to the industry in 2020 and beyond. This article will focus on these challenges and opportunities with Donegal growers William Monagle, Charlie Doherty and Jamie Rankin.

As their farms are within a few kilometres of Co Derry they also have a unique insight into the practical consequences of Brexit.

Challenges

Weather:

The only predictable thing about the weather in Donegal is its unpredictability. We had 210mm of rain in February alone followed by just 137mm from March to the end of May. This made for excellent planting conditions with the majority of crops in by the end of April. Then we had a significant frost on 14 May which badly affected a number of potato crops in the county. Most have recovered but any advantage they had from early planting has been lost.

Market and price volatility: COVID-19 and Brexit

Unlike meat and dairy products, there is no significant export market for Irish potatoes so local demand drives the market. Imports of salad and chipping potatoes come mainly from the UK. COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, a significant effect on the demand for potatoes.

In the initial stages of the lockdown demand increased dramatically for top-quality potatoes for the bagging trade. However, with all fast-food outlets; restaurants and hotels closed the demand for “peeling” potatoes has been decimated. Any recovery in this “peeling” market will be driven by the level of demand from restaurants and hotels once they exit the COVID-19 lockdown. But there could also be strong competition in this market from UK imports.

Whether we end up with deal or no-deal Brexit is another potential challenge and/or opportunity. Donegal has a 140km land border of which only 9km are with the other 25 counties of the ROI via Leitrim. The other 131km borders counties Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh. As a result, farmers in the county are acutely aware of the potential impact of a no-deal Brexit.

The social and economic impact will depend on whether there is a



land “border” and/or some system of regulatory checks on the island or, as previously agreed, this border is in the Irish Sea. The impact of the former would be huge but if the “border” is along the Irish Sea there could be minimal impact to trade and movement.

Unlike other food commodities potatoes could potentially see a positive impact from a no-deal Brexit scenario. For example the UK will be viewed as a third country and the importation of seed potatoes from Scotland would stop immediately. This could provide an opportunity for the return of a significant seed industry in Ireland. Any tariffs would also make the importation of cheap UK potatoes less attractive.

Potato blight

More than 175 years since the famine, blight remains the main disease threat to potato crops in Ireland. Blight strains are constantly mutating and building up fungicide resistance. For example Euroblight detected an increase overall in the population of the blight clones 37 A2, 36 A2 and 41 A2 from 10% to 40%



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across the continent in 2019.

Strains belonging to the clone 37 A2 have reduced sensitivity to Fluazinam (Shirlan/Volley/Tizca) and were detected primarily in Northern Ireland in 2019. Not surprisingly, given our location, some strains were also detected in Donegal.

Potato growers are well aware of the importance of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) principles for blight control.

These include alternating active ingredients as well as managing spray intervals to keep crops healthy. Although most blight fungicides give seven to 10 days protection it can often be difficult to get suitable spraying conditions during this window. As a result, a seven- to eight-day spray interval is common in case conditions are totally unsuitable on days 10, 11 or 12.

Pesticides

All tillage growers are facing the challenge of a reduced arsenal of pesticides to combat pests and diseases. Potato growers face a major challenge in 2020. As of 4 February 2020, Diquat was no longer available for “burning-

off” or desiccating crops before harvest.

This is a major issue for potato growers in Ireland and especially in Donegal. The only alternative chemical desiccant available is a Carfentrazone-based product which does burn off crops but at a significantly slower rate than Diquat. The efficacy of Carfentrazone also improves dramatically with sunlight which unfortunately is in short supply in Donegal in September.

Another recommended option is to physically “flail or swath” the crop to remove leaves from the crop canopy and then apply Carfentrazone on the stems to complete desiccation. Swathing needs dry conditions to be effective. When carried out in wet conditions, it can facilitate the spread of tuber blight and bird damage.

Reducing the levels of N applied to crops at planting is another approach as the crop canopy naturally senesces in the autumn. This can be a guessing game as it is hard to predict how much soil N is available to the crop; weather conditions throughout the growing season will also affect N uptake.

Opportunities

After many years of declining market share, potatoes are now holding their own against imported carbohydrates such as rice and pasta. This was due in part to a Bord Bia advertising campaign promoting the many health benefits of potatoes. This campaign was funded by the DAFM; the National Potato Council and growers themselves.

While a combination of Brexit, EU legislation and climate change will bring many challenges to Irish potato growers in the short- to medium-term it will also bring opportunities, as follows:

- Seed potatoes: the uncertainty around the importation of seed from Scotland post-Brexit could offer opportunities for increasing the seed area grown in Ireland
- Salad and chipping potatoes: the majority of these markets are filled with imported potatoes. Is there an opportunity there for Irish growers?



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Grower profiles

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John and Jamie Rankin

Jamie and his father John harvest approximately 120ha (300 acres) of potatoes annually.

Ten per cent of the area planted is for "salad potatoes" and the remainder are ware potatoes packed for supermarkets.

Jamie sees "salads" as a growing market in their own right as produce can be sold without any effect on the trade for "packing" potatoes.

He is happy with 10% area devoted to salads as: "They are a high-risk crop in that they are difficult to grow; you need to pick your fields carefully; they need irrigation and there is no market for them if it all goes wrong."

On the plus side they are harvested early which is an advantage for the grower and the land owner.

Also, varieties such as Gemson and Jester have performed well in Donegal. Salads help spread the workload as "they can be the last crop planted and the first to be harvested".

As Jamie and John's farmyard and potato stores are 3km from the border Jamie believes a no-deal Brexit with a physical border and/or regulatory checks between Donegal and Northern Ireland "would be the worst thing and a major threat" to his business.

As the area available for planting in Donegal is limited many growers plant crops on both sides of the border. Machinery and inputs can also be



purchased in Northern Ireland so a no-deal scenario has the potential to stop this trade and movement immediately.

He also believes that the loss of Diquat in 2020 is a major issue for potato growers and particularly in Donegal where the weather in September/October is not ideal for alternative desiccation strategies such as flailing or swathing and/or Carfentrazone.

Jamie was to take part in flailing desiccation trials in 2019 but "couldn't get into the fields in August and September because they were too wet".

William Monagle

William and his son-in-law John Sharkey harvest approximately 40ha (100 acres) of potatoes annually. All potatoes are sold for packing for shops and supermarkets.

William's farmyard and potato stores are 800m from the border. "I believe the outcome of the Brexit negotiations will have little

or no effect on the potato industry if the border and/or regulatory checks are in the Irish Sea," says William.

"On the other hand, if there is a no-deal crash out and the border ends up on the island of Ireland and specifically between Donegal and Northern Ireland (NI) it will have a huge impact almost immediately. In that scenario, Donegal growers who traditionally grow on both sides of the border will no longer be able to do so. Also the "curtain will come down immediately" on the supply of seed from Scotland if this turns out to be the case."



Charlie Doherty

Charlie harvests approximately 55ha (135 acres) of potatoes annually. He bags and sells his potatoes directly to shops and supermarkets.

He also grows Kerr's Pinks, Queens, Golden Wonder and Maris Piper for seed.

Charlie's farmyard and potato stores are 2.5km from the NI border. He believes a no-deal Brexit with a physical border and/or regulatory checks "will have some positive impacts on the potato industry as cheap UK imports are a problem at present".

As a seed grower, he also sees opportunities to rejuvenate the Irish seed industry if seed imports from Scotland



are restricted or stopped altogether in the event of a UK no-deal exit.

Harvest

"The loss of Diquat in 2020 is a major issue for all Irish potato growers and Donegal growers in particular as "potato growing has a tight season anyway and we need every good day as it is and alternative desiccation strategies will only push the harvest out even further," he said.

"Ireland does not have the weather for flailing or swathing (or scutching as it's called in Donegal) to be a viable alternative."