

Being Sustainable

By Bernie Leahy, B&T Drystock Adviser, Teagasc, Galway/Clare

What is sustainable in the ordinary farmer's language? Our key marketing organisations such as Bord Bia use it as a primary selling point for Irish produce.

Sustainable farming systems involve better management of our soils, our watercourses, slurry and fertilisers, management of livestock through better breeding and management in our livestock, tillage and horticulture sectors.

In other words, by farming in this way there is a much better chance that the natural resources such as soil, water and farm habitats such as hedges, trees and bog lands will be cared for without excess fertilisers and pesticides and damage and or removal of habitats.

On an extreme note, Caroline McDonald of BBC news wrote that science writer Tim de **Chant** measured our planet's sustainability in terms of the number of planets man needed to survive with our present lifestyles. He pointed out that we were using up natural resources at an alarming rate. Today we need about 1.75 planets to provide the resources for our consumption and absorb our waste. By 2030, we will need two planets. (The United Arab Republic would need five.) He reminded us that we only had one.

There is a difference between being Sustainable and being Commercially Viable.

In Ireland commercially, dairying continues to lead the way according to Bord Bia figures with exports of €5.2Bn, beef exports of €1.9bn, pig exports €586m, sheep exports €357m, horticulture and cereals €221m and poultry €152m. Bord Bia's recommendation to the dairy industry was to protect and encourage biodiversity, in water quality and welfare of cows and calves.

Tara McCarthy, CEO of Bord Bia believes sustainability, particularly in beef, still commands the UK market because of quality standards. Sustainability of the product is the basis of these standards.

Many Beef and Sheep farmers participate in the Bord BIA quality assurance scheme, which gives standards such as that under Origin Green. Future standards will require all food and horticultural products being produced under sustainable standards.

Below is a sample survey that farmers fill in as part of their Bord Bis Audit every eighteen months.

[Sample-farmer feedback-report Bord Bia.pdf](#)

Teagasc are developing a new 5 year National Programme called the Teagasc Suckler Signpost Beef Demonstration Farm Programme 2021

In this Programme, 20 mixed dry stock monitor farmers are to be selected from mixed Suckler and Sheep farmers and Organic Farms countrywide. The basis of the programme adopt new technologies such as Grass Measuring, Nutrient Management Planning, use of Protected Urea, Increased Clover Use, Cattle Weighing, Mapping of Habitats on the farm which will be the basis of a Farm Sustainability Plan. These 20 farms will act as national Demonstration farms for to help farmers become more sustainable and efficient. The farmer bases his response on what he earns for making these changes!

This Programme should be very valuable to Galway and Clare farmers because they together have approximately 20% of the National Suckler Herd whilst Galway has the highest number of lowland sheep (14%) according to DAFF Sheep census figures.

To be Sustainable, You have to Live Sustainably

Getting connected to Broadband has helped farmers sell their cattle and sheep online at the marts. This also applies to family members working from home to comply with Covid restrictions but also reducing wasteful energy use in long journeys to the cities for work.

Convert a building on farm for living, holiday or office space. With a good idea, Enterprise Ireland loans (50%), LEADER grants (75%) help is available provided the project is a non-agricultural enterprise. The Revenue Commission offer tax exemptions for business building improvements.

Greener houses are sprouting up in some rural areas where rural dwellers are using 100 % natural insulation such as sheep fleece in their dwelling houses. These are available from Irish and UK manufacturers.

More native renewable woods are being used in Irish buildings, for example, at NUI, Galway, the Timber Engineering Research Group won the Wood Awards Ireland innovation category 2020 for work on engineered timber. Irish grown Sitka Spruce is suitable for use in Cross Laminated Timber (CLT), which will replace non-renewable steel and concrete in future.

Renewable energy is becoming compulsory in new housing but is not compulsory in new farm building projects. Solar Panels on sheds, solar powered fencing and indeed water pumps are becoming more popular.

Community Energy projects are already active in some counties using Wind and Solar Energy as renewable energy. Community led projects such as Temple Derry Wind farm in Tipperary and more recently, Claremorris and Western District Energy Co-operative use local solar energy such as solar panels and auction excess energy to an outside Grid. Horace Plunkett, father of the Co-Op movement in Ireland in early 1900's, believed communities could flourish by small efficient farmers and businesses joining as groups to have a profitable and sustainable "playing card."

Take a page out of the "1916 Garden at the Mellows" Event 5 years ago at Teagasc Athenry, where last years and this year's Covid lockdown might tempt you to sow Daff heritage Varieties of potatoes, cabbages, shallots and onions, carrots, turnips, beetroots and fruit garden, rhubarb and gooseberries and heritage Apple trees. Irish Seed Savers, Scarriff were the main suppliers. Otherwise purchase seed suitable for Irish conditions as seed supplies could be affected by Brexit disruption.

The Irish Land League was borne out of the suppression of the Great Famine. Global prosperity followed the two world wars of the 20th century. Under the cloud of the Global Pandemic, we face another great test, Climate Change. Sustainable systems are our only weapons!

