

Launch of SignPost Farms Programme

Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues.

Today's event is important because it underlines the seriousness with which the entire agriculture and food sector considers the challenge of climate change. And it demonstrates the willingness of farmers, processors, state agencies and the department to work in lock step to address the challenge.

When it comes to agriculture there are two misunderstandings that need to be nailed.

First, in most public discussions about agriculture's contribution to climate change, the focus is on the sector's 35% share of CO₂ equivalent GHGs. But what's important is the sector's contribution to global warming. That's much lower. About 2/3 of agricultural emissions arise because of biogenic methane. And biogenic methane is a short-lived gas compared with CO₂ or nitrous oxide. If the production of biogenic methane can be stabilised then this source of global warming will be neutralised.

However, it's going to take time for regulation to catch up with the science. And in the meantime it makes

little sense to engineer a precipitous reduction in ruminant livestock numbers.

A second misunderstanding is that agriculture is the same as every other sector and must bear its burden of adjustment. There is no issue about agriculture standing up to the plate in respect of the non-methane gases. The sector, like other sectors, is being called upon to decarbonise. Teagasc research work on the MACCs and the Department's AgClimatise paper set out what can be done with the non-methane gases. The SignPost Programme points to how this can be achieved on our farms.

And we confidently anticipate that science will continue to deliver further technological solutions.

Where the sector is utterly different however concerns the unreasonable requests on it to substantially reduce emissions of biogenic methane. A substantial reduction in biogenic methane will not be possible without a substantial reduction in animal numbers. Such a development would adversely affect livelihoods in rural Ireland, and not just on farms but in processing plants and the wider rural economy.

There's an obvious point that's worth stating. Animals are essential to the production of meat and milk.

Indeed they are existential inputs for our meat and dairy industries. No other sector has this characteristic. Sure, adapting to climate change will present other sectors with additional costs as they switch inputs from fossil-fuel sourced inputs to more carbon-friendly or carbon-free inputs. But this adjustment will not threaten the very existence of these sectors.

The programme that's being launched today is but one contribution to ensuring that the sector plays its part in addressing the challenge of global warming. Other national policy and regulatory measures can be anticipated. Also food processing companies no doubt will be bringing forward their own initiatives. Farmers themselves are also likely to be innovative in their responses. I hope, in fact, that the SP Programme will act as a catalyst for all sorts of innovative responses.

I hope also that it inspires young farmers, in particular, to grasp the opportunities which are always on the flip side of challenges. We in Teagasc will ensure that our education and training programmes, including our new CPD programme, will enable the farmers of the future to embrace the sustainability challenge with confidence.

Our Chairman has acknowledged all of the various partners that are in support of this programme.

And I'm confident that as this programme proceeds more and more partners will want to become involved.

I want to conclude by acknowledging the creativity and hard work of my colleagues on this programme. It's built on several years of top class research. It's very much a collaborative effort but Frank O'Mara led its development from the outset and can also be credited with the title, "SignPost Farms". Pat Murphy, who's the Head of Environment, Knowledge Transfer, was also centrally involved from the beginning. In the last few months Tom O'Dwyer has done trojan work as manager of the programme.

We have the solutions. Now we've got to get on with their implementation.

It's my great pleasure therefore to officially launch the SignPost Programme.

Thank you. And back to you Chairman.