

New Teagasc Head of Knowledge Transfer is a farmer's son at heart

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Dr Stan Lalor re-joined Teagasc in November 2020 to take over the position of Director of Knowledge Transfer in the organisation following the recent retirement of Prof Tom Kelly.

Stan is no stranger to Teagasc, or indeed to many of our farmer clients and stakeholders, having worked in Teagasc previously in both advisory and research roles, before embarking on a period in the private sector with Grassland AGRO in 2014.

The role he now undertakes is a senior position with responsibility for both advisory and education services in Teagasc. I caught up with Stan to get some insights into the man himself, what he learned during his time in the private sector and how he sees some of the opportunities that lie ahead in his new role.

Tell me a bit about your background

I am a Co Laois native and a farmer's son. I grew up in Camross on a mixed farm in the foothills of the Slieve Blooms. At that time, the farm had a variety of enterprises including dairy cows, sucklers, finishing cattle, sheep, and we even had the occasional field in tillage with barley and fodder beet both grown regularly.



Knowing the daily workings of the farm at home has been invaluable to me in all the jobs I have had down the years

As the availability of family labour declined over the years, the farm became more concentrated on dairying. However, a beef component is still an important part of the system.

The farm is now being run by my brother, Albert. His teenage son Robert is showing great interest in farming as well. Having lived away from



Dr Stan Lalor has recently rejoined Teagasc as Head of Director of Knowledge Transfer. He previously worked in both advisory and research roles in Teagasc before spending the past six years in the private sector.

Laois for several years I was lucky to be able to move back home five years ago and live close to the farm again.

I have always stayed connected with the home farm and enjoy farm work and help out as much as I can. Knowing the daily workings of the farm at home has been invaluable to me in all the jobs I have had down the years. It keeps me grounded in the everyday issues and challenges that farmers are facing.

What were your previous roles in Teagasc?

My first job with Teagasc was as a dairy advisor, working initially in Kildare and later in Monaghan. I had studied soil science after finishing my agricultural science degree, so that gave me an opportunity to work in research at Teagasc Johnstown Castle in the areas of soils and nutrients.

I initially worked on slurry management, mainly on the Low Emissions

Slurry Spreading Systems (LESS). I gradually got more involved in broader soil fertility research and nutrient management planning over time.

Advisory experience was extremely useful as a researcher as it gave me an understanding of how to go about doing, and communicating, research in a way that advisors and farmers could use. In particular, the need for simple tools and messages was key.

The network of advisory contacts that I had built up was also invaluable as I was regularly able to get advisors' ideas and input into the research we were doing and to the tools we were developing. This helped the research to have an impact out on farms.

You have recently returned to Teagasc after six years in the private sector. What can Teagasc learn from your experience there?

Working in Grassland AGRO for six years was a brilliant experience. I had joined Teagasc straight out of college and I had no hands-on experience of working anywhere else. The opportunity to see how another organisation works and operates was refreshing. It gave me an opportunity to meet new people and gain experience in the industry from a different perspective.

I was involved in a lot of technical development and projects, but my primary role was commercial management within the business. I got a chance to work in all areas of the business including strategy development, financial reporting, people management, sales and marketing, customer relations and operations.

The private sector experience strongly highlighted for me the need to always consider the customer. No matter what you do, you are ultimately working for, or producing something, for somebody else. You need to consider the customer or end-user needs, and how best you can deliver a product or a service that matches those needs.



Continued on page 8



Stan highlights how helping his brother Albert on the farm at home has been of great benefit down the years, by keeping him in close contact with the everyday issues and challenges facing farmers.



Continued from page 6

The sustainability of farming and food production is an ever-increasing challenge. How will Irish farmers be asked to contribute?

This is a key area for the coming years. Teagasc is focusing on sustainability as a central and overarching priority in its Statement of Strategy for the next three years. It is an ongoing and serious challenge, but it is also an opportunity.

Farmers and the entire food chain have always been faced with the challenge of staying relevant to the needs and demands of its customers. This is no different to any business or sector in the economy. We are seeing a huge swing in the demands from the public around how food is produced, and the impact it may have on the environment. This is an evolving reality within the context of farming and food production activities.

We have challenges we must address. Water quality, greenhouse gases and carbon, and biodiversity are all high on the agenda, and agriculture has a role to play. We need to make sure our farming practices minimise any damage and lead the way in guiding this. We have tools, practices and technologies that can do this, and we need to continue to research and develop these and get them implemented on farms.

This is a job for every farmer to look at on their own individual farm. Solutions are complex, and often farm-specific. In Teagasc, one of our priorities is to provide this farm-specific advice to farmers so we can achieve the best outcomes.

We shouldn't lose sight of this being an opportunity as well. One thing I have noticed in recent years is the huge increase in awareness and interest at farm level in understanding these issues and challenges and wanting to react and deal with them. More and more farmers are recognising the need to integrate their farming with the nature around them and the soil under their feet.

Many farmers contribute to the environment in a hugely positive way. There are also numerous examples of innovating farmers, farmer groups and programmes that are making good progress.

Initiatives such as the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) as well initiatives within European Innovation Partnership (EIP) projects and operational groups are showing the importance of local-level initiatives to address local challenges. Collec-



Supporting the next generation of farmers is critical. Stan helps his nephew Robert with grass measuring using the PastureBase Ireland app.

tively, these will make a difference to making progress on a national scale.

What would you say to a young person considering a future in farming?

This is an important question, as the education programme by Teagasc is also under my area of responsibility. To be honest, you could extend the question to ask it for "anybody" considering a future in farming, as there are opportunities there for more than just young people.

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Teagasc has an ongoing programme already in place in colleges and with regional education courses on training young and new farmers. There has also been an increased focus in recent years on continuous and ongoing professional development and

training for more experienced farmers who wish to further deepen their farm business, people management and technical capabilities.

The development and coordination of more of these activities and programmes is a priority for the future.

I would always strongly encourage anybody to get involved in farming. Many people enjoy farming and appreciate the potential it can offer in terms of lifestyle, outdoor work and balancing family life. As a business, there are opportunities in every enterprise through optimising technical efficiency, business planning and being innovative.

If I were to give three simple tips to all farmers, but particularly to young people starting out, they would be:

- Engage with technical information and training and put this into practice on the farm by setting targets and measuring performance.
- Always be open to ideas, tools and practices that can help with farm management and farm performance and don't be afraid to try new things.
- Build a good network of support around you through your advisor, discussion groups and other farming and business networks.