

Organic sheep earn their keep

This Galway flock generates several income streams.

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It's just over seven years since Michael Burke began converting his 64ha holding into an organic farm. He achieved full organic status in 2017. Located near the town of Dunmore in north Galway, the farm now carries organic sheep, beef and tillage enterprises.

"Our home, Dunblaney House, was built in 1787 for the then Archbishop of Tuam, who resided here until 1798," says Michael.

"I see our organic farming system as being more in tune with the way the land would have been worked back then."

"The fact that at least some of the land is suitable for tillage crops as well as the livestock enterprises is a big advantage for an organic farm," adds Michael. A flock of 120 ewes are co-grazed with a 23-cow suckler herd, with most of the progeny taken to beef.

An Aubrac bull was chosen for

ease of calving and finishing. "We have a link with Good Herdsman to slaughter our cattle, who are largely finished on a grass-based diet. This means a lot of the grain from our 23ha of spring oats is sold direct to Flahavans."

In 2021, the crop yielded a respectable 4.5/ha with a price per tonne of €392. Michael says he foots the bill for transporting the grain. "Straw yield from organic crops is typically low, as the presence of grass weeds means we have a higher cutting height. So we availed of the straw incorporation measure in 2021.

"On top of the payment incentive, I felt I was getting better value from a soil fertility viewpoint, to incorporate the straw back into the ground and buy in my own straw needs," he adds.

Grassland management

From the outset, Michael placed a big emphasis on soil analysis, and where necessary, correcting soil pH with lime. The slurry and farmyard manure (FYM) produced is targeted at areas that are sub-optimal for P and K. The main grazing block is divided into paddocks through a combination of picture perfect stone walls and sheep fencing.

The combination of traditional and state-of-the-art infrastructure lends itself well to rotational grazing. White



clover and other companion forages are stitched into the most suitable grazing fields.

"As some of the tillage ground begins to come back into grass, we are considering putting in red clover reseed with the aim of getting a number of cuts of high-quality red clover silage," says Michael.

Producing organic lamb

The majority of the ewe flock are mules or mule crosses and are mainly mated with terminal sire breeds such as Charolais. The flock also includes a small number of Galway ewes.

"Replacements are purchased under derogation, which allows us to replace 20% of the flock from non-organic sources," says Michael. "This year, just over 1.5 lambs were weaned per ewe mated."

Ewes are outwintered on forage rape, a catch crop that is stitched in after the oats have been harvested. This reduces the amount of expensive concentrates fed pre-lambing and ewes are only housed for a short period around lambing time.



Michael Burke with Damien Costello.



Michael Burke and Glenn Corbett.

“Our goal is to finish the majority of lambs off grass with a relatively low stocking rate on our dry limestone ground, so we lamb in February,” says Michael. He acknowledges the challenge of getting an outlet for finished organic lamb, but so far this season, 50 lambs have been sent to ICM Camolin where he achieves a premium of 80-90c/kg over conventional lamb.

Adding value to wool

Michael also runs a successful alternative enterprise from the farm under the trade name ‘Woolow’. The company manufactures and sells pillows made from sheeps’ wool wrapped in a cotton casing.

This year, Michael has purchased some of his wool supply from the Galway Wool Co-op, as the traditional Galway sheep breed are renowned for the quality of their wool.

“Online sales, in particular, have been going well,” says Michael. Browsing through the website woolow.com, there are lots of positive feedback from customers. Pillows fit for an archbishop, you might say.

New Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) – What’s involved?

A new tranche of the OFS has been announced and is due to open soon – this will be the second tranche of OFS in 2022. This demonstrates how eager the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is to increase the levels of participation in organic farming.

Organic farming in Ireland is at a low level (when compared to other countries in the EU), but there is potential to improve and increase participation. We have approximately 2% of our utilisable farm area farmed organically at present. The target is to increase that to 7%.

The payment rates, announced in August, have been increased for this tranche in an effort to incentivise new farmers into organics. For example, for a typical drystock farmer, the payment rates have increase from €220/ha to €300/ha for the first two years when in conversion, and then up from €170 to €250 when converted in years three to five.

Other useful changes have been to increase the area paid at the top rate to 70ha and also reducing the stocking rate required from 0.5LU/ha to 0.15LU/ha.

What you need to do:

- Background information/homework

There are a number of steps involved when considering the move to organic farming. The first is to contact an established organic operator in your own area (such as Michael Burke, the farmer in this article).

If you can’t do this, then perhaps get along to one of the many organic farm walks organised by Teagasc or the organic farm bodies in locations around the country. This will help you see what other farmers went through during their conversion processes and whether you could do something similar.

- Complete an approved training course

Teagasc and other agencies such as NOTS (National Organic Training Skillnet) run 25-hour QQI courses entitled ‘Introduction to Organic Farming’. Normally available at locations around the country, the courses delivered by Teagasc are currently a blend of online learning and a visit to an organic host farm.

These are worthwhile to obtain a fundamental knowledge of the organic farming principles. These principles include animal health and welfare, crop husbandry, soil nutrition, biodiversity and sustainability, all within the remit of Irish and EU organic standards.

- Organic farm body – application and certification.

The private inspection bodies, or organic farm bodies, in Ireland are the Organic Trust and the Irish Organic Association (IOA). A potential entrant to Organic farming will need to contact either of these bodies soon if considering the upcoming tranche of OFS.

You, with the help of your advisor, will draw up a conversion plan, laying out what steps you will need to complete on your farm to move from conventional to organic farming. The organic farm body will inspect you at that stage and then be willing to certify your produce as organic in the future.

- Join the OFS

If you have a minimum of 3ha, you or your advisor can apply online for the OFS, once the scheme opens officially. There will be what’s called a ranking and selection, where your application is marked against those of other applicants. With such a big budget (€256m), it is possible most applicants will be successful.

One thing to watch out for concerns those people entering the new environmental scheme, ACRES. The issue of a double payment has deterred new applicants in the past. This could happen in the case of a farmer joining ACRES and having land-based payments/actions such as Low Input Grassland (LIG), for example.

These land-based area payments cannot draw both ACRES and OFS payments – it’s one or the other. It would be advisable to discuss this with your agricultural advisor.

–Glenn Corbett