



ORGANIC CATTLE AND SHEEP

Introduction

The organic drystock sector is the largest of the organic enterprises in Ireland, with about 70% of all organic producers involved in either cattle and/or sheep production. This is mainly because the transition at farm level

from conventional methods is relatively straightforward compared to other enterprises like tillage, dairying or horticulture. Soluble mineral fertilisers are prohibited, but some inputs such as lime and rock phosphate are permitted. Manufactured agro-chemicals (e.g., herbicides) are prohibited.

For full interpretation of the rules and regulations governing organic drystock farming, it is essential to study the 'Organic Food and Farming Standards in Ireland' document, which is available from the organic certification bodies (OCBs) – the Irish Organic Association (IOA) and the Organic Trust.



Conversion to organic drystock farming is more straightforward than in other farming systems.

the processors to find out what breeds are most suitable. For cattle, there is a market for both traditional and continental breeds. Generally, a continental-type cow is recommended using a traditional breed of bull. For sheep, organic farmers tend to choose breeds with a high tolerance to worms (e.g., Texel). A crossbred ewe can be crossed with either Texel, Suffolk or Charolais to increase growth rate.

Factors to consider

There are a number of factors that you need to take into account when considering the transition.

Housing

Many farmers, especially cattle farmers, find that the greatest alterations that need to be made at farm level are changes to winter housing. More generous space allowances are required – for cattle the rule of thumb is that 1.0m² is required for every 100kg liveweight. All cattle and sheep must have access to a

dry-bedded lying area. Up to 50% of this area can be slatted, but the rest must be solid floor. Conventional straw may be used for bedding.

Breed selection

It is recommended that you establish your breeding herd and/or flock prior to entering conversion. Once in the system, you are generally only allowed to buy in 10% of your adult herd or 20% of your flock each year as non-organic. Soil type and location will affect your breed choice. Carry out research with

Feed

As 100% of the feed must be from organic or in-conversion sources, you need to ideally produce all your feed from the farm. However, you can source organic grain and compound ration when required.

Veterinary treatments

Protecting animal health is the number one objective of the organic drystock farmer. Routine treatment of animals with anthelmintics is prohibited, and a rotational grazing system should be in place to minimise

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worm burden. This is particularly the case for sheep-only farms, due to parasite build-up, especially stomach worms. Permission has to be sought to carry out any mutilations and an appropriate anaesthetic/analgesic must be used. The vet is an important advisor on your farm. If a problem occurs, faecal analysis is recommended and the vet can sign-off the appropriate treatment on the organic certification record book. The animal health plan, produced as part of the conversion plan, deals with mineral deficiencies and vaccination issues.

Buying stock

Weanlings and store cattle can be purchased from a number of dedicated organic marts, which run throughout the country (see OCB



Sheep grazing helps to control weeds and encourages white clover.

websites for information). Private farm-to-farm sales between organic farmers are becoming increasingly popular. If you plan on buying in store animals for finishing over the summer, you require good linkages and advanced planning with store cattle sellers.

Soil fertility

Good clover swards (especially white clover for grazing and red clover for quality silage), and targeted use of lime, farmyard manure and slurry, mean that coping without chemical fertiliser can be managed effectively. Soil fertility inputs that are commonly imported onto organic farms include:

- lime;
- cattle slurry from another grassland-based farmer (either organic and conventional farmer; derogation farm source >170kg nitrogen (N)/ha is also permitted);
- organic and/or free-range chicken manure;
- dairy sludge from an approved dairy processing plant; and,
- certain mineral sources of fertilisers, e.g., ground rock phosphate, basic slag.

Note: organic manures from factory farms, including commercial pig and non-organic or non-free-range chicken farms are not permitted.

Organic markets



Speak to processors about organic markets.

Speak with other organic farmers and processors about potential markets. Major factory outlets for organic beef are Good Herdsmen, Slaney Meats and ABP. The major outlet for organic lamb is Irish Country Meats. Premium prices of 15-20% have generally been achievable for organic beef and lamb in recent years. Some organic farmers successfully sell meat directly.

Profitability

Organic drystock production can be a relatively profitable enterprise. Costs of production can be significantly reduced with no artificial fertiliser and reduced veterinary costs. Although the cost of concentrates is higher compared to conventional methods, this can be

reduced by growing tillage crops on the farm and/or choosing earlier-maturing breeds that require lower levels of feed. Housing built to meet organic standards may also add to the expense, but on-farm capital investment grants may be available from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

The key components to achieving profitability are a decent level of production using grass/legume swards, achieving a premium price for your animal, and an efficient low-cost system of production, which includes good grassland management, a herd health plan and prudent use of organic manures and other permitted fertiliser inputs.

Further information

For further information contact your local Teagasc advisory office.

www.teagasc.ie/about/farm-advisory/advisory-regions

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Other useful fact sheets in this series:

- ▶ Steps to Organic Conversion
- ▶ Organic Horticulture
- ▶ Organic Cereals
- ▶ Organic Dairy Farming
- ▶ Organic Poultry

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