

## **RDS-Teagasc Irish Agri-food Climate Action Summit**

According to research published by Teagasc on the Abatement Potential of Greenhouse Gas Emission in Irish Agriculture 2021-2030, in the absence of any mitigation, agriculture GHG emissions are projected to increase by 9% in Ireland by 2030 relative to the 2005 baseline. 2018 saw Ireland ranked as the worst performing country in the EU for action on climate change for the second year in a row. With 30% plus of overall national emissions, the Irish agriculture sector is coming under increased pressure to address how it proposes to deliver on the 2030 emission reduction targets in a real and meaningful way.

**In order to make progress towards this target, major changes in practices, policy, societal attitudes and knowledge transfer will be required.**

In March 2019, the RDS and Teagasc organised a Climate Action Summit that brought together some of the leading figures in the Irish agri-food and environmental science sectors to examine how mitigation, sequestration and fossil fuel replacements can be part of future development policies together with the supports, incentives and the changes in policy required at Irish and EU level to help deliver on our 2030 targets.

## **Irish Agri-food Climate Action Summit Programme**

### **Session 1**

**Chair:** Professor Cathal O'Donoghue, RDS Committee of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and Dean of Arts, NUI Galway

**Potential for Mitigation in agricultural emissions** – Dr Frank O'Mara, Director of Research, Teagasc

### **Session 2**

**Chair:** Professor Thia Hennessy, Dean of School and Chair of Agri-Food Economics at Cork University Business School

**Report and recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action** – Hildegard Naughton TD, Committee Chair

**EU policy developments that will support the achievement of mitigation, land use change and fossil fuel displacement potential** – Mairead McGuinness MEP, Vice President of the European Parliament.

Article originally published in Minerva issue no.43 / April 2019

## Challenged by climate change

*Climate change tends to evoke heated responses. A special event at the RDS heard good science on climate change debated with good manners.*

Ireland is unusual for most developed countries in that the science of climate change inevitably revolves around farming practices and land use. This is not the case for many of our contemporaries. So whether we like it or not, Ireland will have to be a leader in the step-change required.

The RDS, along with Teagasc, hosted the Irish Agri-Food Climate Action Summit to reconcile two positions that, all too often, focus on differences rather than shared understandings. The meeting had two sessions: the first looked at the nature of the Ireland's agricultural emissions problem; and the second discussed the best ways to achieve Ireland's committed goals. The tone and agenda of the summit meant it was a natural succession to the work conducted by the RDS and the IIEA on climate smart agriculture during 2016.

Opening the Summit, Prof. Cathal O'Donoghue, of the Committee of Agriculture and Rural Affairs welcomed delegates to the Society which, he said, provided a neutral venue for debate. The purpose of the Summit was to remind the stakeholders of the key issues and to move to work towards a consensus position.

[The contributors agreed to operate under the Chatham House Rules, meaning that, aside from the main presentations, what was discussed can be reported but not by whom.]

## Challenging Targets

Teagasc's Director of Research, Professor Frank O'Mara, gave the first presentation and outlined that the target for reduction in emissions of 20% by 2020 (from 2005) will be missed, and that the target of a 30% reduction by 2030 is even more challenging. He outlined three pathways to mitigate emissions from agriculture: by on-farm measures; by sequestering carbon; and, through energy efficiency. He warned that without uptake of these mitigation measures, emissions will increase and that, across the world, the uptake of mitigation measures in agriculture is poor.

From the floor two economists took differing approaches to solving the issue around agricultural emissions. The first commentator, one of several prominent economists present, observed that as it is a global problem and, by definition, world production equals world consumption, the emissions policy should be moved to a consumption model, i.e., everyone should pay the emissions cost of what they consume.

The second contributor was of the mind that we could not afford to wait for policy to potentially change to our advantage and observed that as agriculture accounts for one-third of Irish emissions, Teagasc's work is vital in framing low-cost ways to change farming and cut emissions.

One of several farmers present stated that while addressing the climate issue is not optional, the way in which it is addressed is optional: "we need the advisory service expanded to tell us the full range of options". The potential for carbon sequestration through forestry was raised from the floor: "We need to be planting trees now. Forestry is good and it's part of the solution". However, while welcoming the prospect of increased afforestation, an expert on biodiversity questioned the monocultural nature of forestry in Ireland, saying: "We need to look at native species and greater diversity in forestry". She also observed that the use of multi-species of grass would have an economic and diversity benefit.

### **Setting agendas**

The second part of the Summit commenced with presentations from Hildegard Naughton, TD, Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment and Mairead McGuinness, MEP, first Vice President of the European Parliament.

Deputy Naughton explained that her Committee had been charged with looking at the Citizens' Assembly recommendations on making Ireland a leader in climate change. Having set out some of the horrors of climate change (drought, floods, famine, pests and parasites), she stated that the three recommendations of the Assembly are: to tax greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; introduce a standard measure of food waste; and, support land use diversification. Her most significant statement was that the Committee will not accept recommendations for any taxation at the farm gate. However, she also said that there is a need for a different model of agriculture in Ireland and that globally the move towards consumption of meat and dairy products will have to be reversed. Deputy Naughton also said that anaerobic digestion is underused in Ireland; and, that the Government needs a strong implementation plan for its action on climate change.

Mairead McGuinness stated that the Irish farmer increased production when the nation needed it but is being "climate-shamed" at the moment and feels that emotionally. She said a battle is raging between farmers with sequestration and those with large output. There is also a battle, she said, on the distribution of Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) payments on these issues. She said she was concerned on a human level that farmers are under relentless pressure and for that reason she doesn't like the New Zealand model of agriculture as it has less human factors. We need a more rounded view, but she said, farmers do need to do more on

habitats and the environment. She cited the new Chairman of Glanbia when he said that dairy farmers need to plant more trees. Meanwhile, the Vice President of the European Parliament also said that policy incoherence in the European Union needs to change.

In comments, a leading figure in the agri-food sector said that the target of 50% in food exports in the Foodwise programme was viewed as overly ambitious – and yet, Ireland came in ahead of target. That demonstrates, he said, that the industry can respond to a programme and there is no reason why we can't do that with climate change as well. However, this is an urgent problem and the reality is that farming is complex and traditionally slow to change. Additionally, while he agreed with the earlier commentator saying the policy should focus on consumption; the reality is the policy we have focuses on production and we have to help farmers with that. He said Ireland should emphasise diversification within systems: dairy farmers should plant native species of forestry; support anaerobic digestion; and, there is huge potential in our grass. Lastly, he said, we need to increase our investment in both research and in advisory services to be able to tell farmers how to change their practices.

A Department of Agriculture representative agreed that agriculture has managed big transitions in the past and can do so again. This can be achieved by regulation; incentives; and, market pull. He said that the evolution of the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) into the Agri-Environment Options Scheme (AEOS) and onto the Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) has meant that farmers now do take the correct actions at the right time within that scheme. We now need to leverage CAP payments to bring change while the Department will work with industry to drive further change and achieve the necessary goals. One of the farm leaders present observed that dairy farmers had achieved a 14% increase in milk output per cow while simultaneously achieving a reduction in the carbon footprint per kg of milk solids. Rural Ireland depends on the dairy and beef industries he said and climate action will have to be economically feasible for the farmer. In the meantime, farmers, he said, are faced with unfair trading practices on the part of industry and retailers. He also felt that solar energy could have a big role to play on farms.

Another industry player asked if there is any investment in researching the life cycle of gases, especially methane? Another said that agriculture has a very good story to tell, but that other sectors such as heat and transport have not performed. A leading researcher replied that there is a debate amongst scientists about how to account for the life cycle of methane and that Irish scientists are following that debate closely. However, regardless of how you account for methane, he said there is no doubt among scientists that more methane is bad news.

Another commentator, who described himself as a private citizen, observed that if we fail to meet our targets, there will be a fine to be divided up among citizens. That could prompt a very damaging debate about who should pay that fine.

### **A short report**

Closing the Summit, Professor O'Mara said that the unique gathering had shown that the sector is serious about meeting the challenge of climate change. It also demonstrated that there is an opportunity for Irish agriculture to be the first such sector in the world to attack the problem. Professor Cathal O'Donoghoe said that the Summit had surpassed the hopes of the Society and that he and Prof. Thia Hennessy would prepare a short report on behalf of the Committee.