



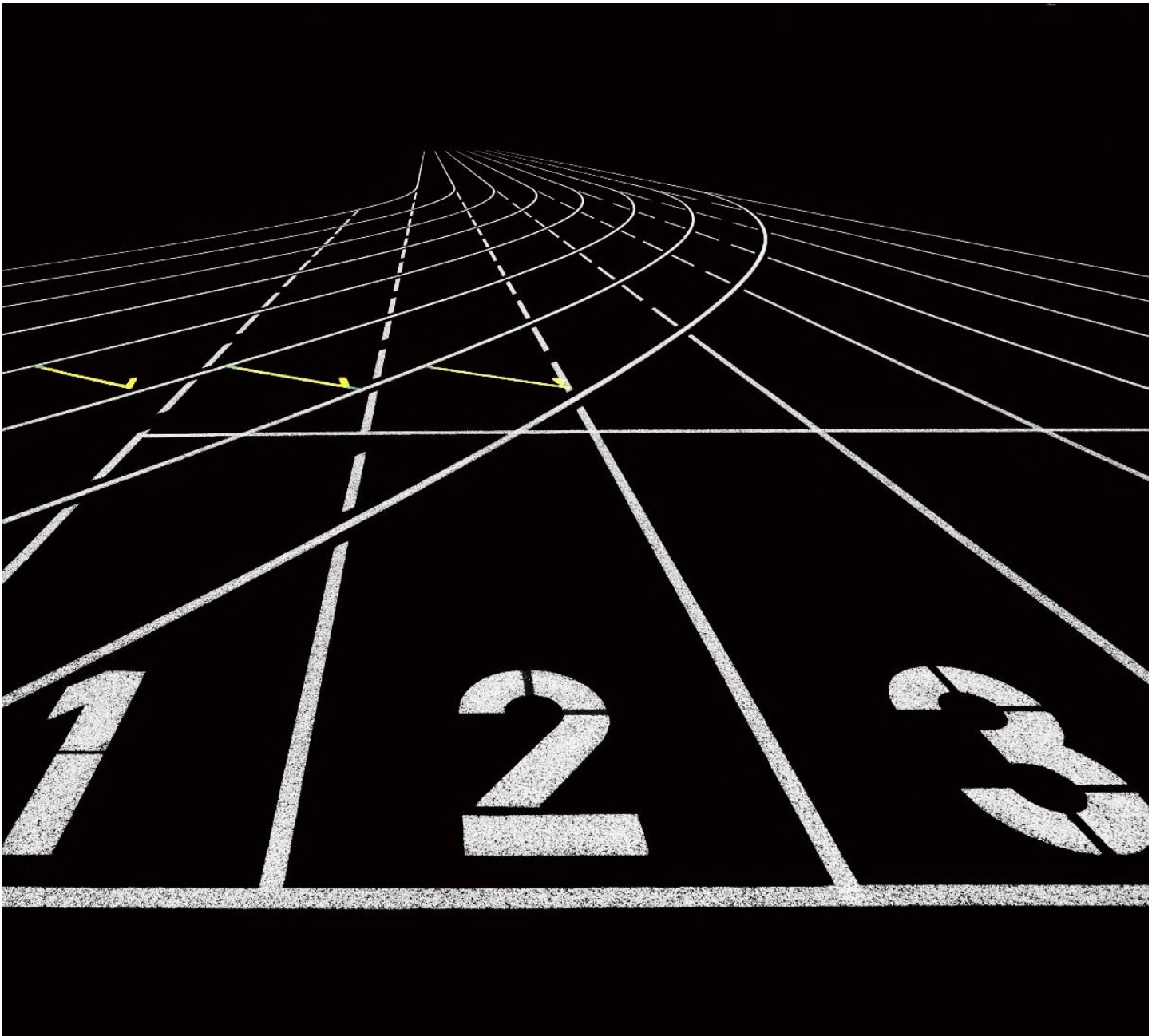
GROWING ORGANICS

TEAGASC IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE RDS
LIVESTREAM 2PM - 4PM: FRIDAY APRIL 1ST 2022

RAPPORTEUR REPORT

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WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Professor Cathal O'Donoghue, the Chairperson of the RDS Committee of Agriculture and Rural Affairs welcomed speakers and attendees to the livestream event. He explained that the event aimed to highlight the potential of organic farming with a government target to increase land farmed under organics to 7.5% by 2030 representing “one of the biggest changes to land use” in history. However, he pointed out that the sector was not without its challenges and coordinated action was needed between farmers, processors and markets. The aim of the seminar was to engage stakeholders in finding solutions in order to reach organic targets in Ireland.

‘FARMERS NEED TO THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX’ - MINISTER HACKETT

Pippa Hackett, Minister of State for Land Use and Biodiversity at the Department of Agriculture

In her opening address, Minister of State for Land Use and Biodiversity, Pippa Hackett, said that farmers needed to be prepared to embrace change and think “outside the box” in order for the country to reach an organic farm area of 7.5% by 2030. Minister Hackett spoke frankly about the fact that organic farming would not suit all farmers but insisted that the Department of Agriculture were determined to present organic farming as a viable option for farmers.

She pointed out that funding for organic farming had increased from €56m to €256m in the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) between 2023 and 2027. The minister also admitted that markets would be needed to ensure a “vibrant market for organic produce” was developed and said to that end she had set up the Organic Forum, which would bring together a range of stakeholders who would meet at the end of the month.

“Everyone has a part to play in government. We need to explore how we can develop public procurement in the organic sector,” the minister said.

Education in organics was also highlighted as key by the minister and she said would be working closely with the Director of Teagasc Frank O’Mara and Director of Knowledge in Teagasc Stan Lalor, over the coming months.

“I truly believe that there has never been a more exciting time to be involved in organics. I hope that you all enjoy today’s event, and I’m sure we will come away with from this afternoon’s panels informed, energised, and enthusiastic about the road ahead,” she concluded.

ORGANICS IS NOT NICHE ANYMORE -

ELENA PANICHI

Elena Panichi, Head of Organic Production in DG Agri

Organics cannot be considered “niche” anymore, was the message from the Head of Organic Production in DG Agri, Elena Panichi.

Addressing the livestream, she said that organics currently occupies 9.1% of total utilised agricultural land, or 15 million hectares, across the EU, with an overall target of reaching 25% under the Farm to Fork strategy by 2030. She pointed out that organic markets had grown over the last decade and that the market was worth €45bn in 2020 and the EU was the second single largest market for organic produce globally after North America.

“Germany on its own accounts for €15bn, followed by France worth almost €13bn,” she said “€348 euros are spent per person per capita in Denmark and that’s the highest level we have in Europe for spending.”

1.6% organic land in Ireland

Panichi did not shy away from highlighting Ireland’s low level of organic land at just 1.6%, but pointed out that premium prices and listening to consumers could help to grow the sector.

“Consumers basically choose organic because they are concerned about the environment. So really, they embrace the environmental aspect of organics and they want a GMO-free product and try to avoid food containing pesticide residues,” she explained.

In the wider context, the European Commission had recommended to Ireland to make a “significant effort” to increase the area of land under organics in the next CAP and to ensure that Green Deal targets were met and she was “very glad” that the country seemed to have taken this seriously. When it comes to marketing organic produce, she outlined how consumers valued national organic logos alongside the EU certification and that the strict EU legislation around labelling and certification helped to instill consumer confidence.

She concluded by saying that each Member State had been required to present an organic action plan under CAP and the Commission was committed to championing organic farming across Member States. She pointed to the launch of a designated “Organic Day” by the Commission and the series of organic awards that include a number of categories, and invited attendees to enter nominations.

UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS TO FARMERS GOING ORGANIC

Professor Andrew Barnes, LIFT H202 & Scotland's Rural College

Understanding the barriers to farmers switching to organic farming or more ecological farming methods was the main point of the presentation given by Professor Andrew Barnes of Scotland's Rural College (SRUC).

The LIFT research conducted by Professor Barnes was conducted on a wide spectrum of uptake of agroecological approaches to farming from conventional to organic farmers across Europe and showed that while conventional farmers were focused primarily on lifestyle and values, these focus topics were expanded in organic farming to cover other areas. He sought to understand what exactly made farmers switch to organic farming.

“Another aspect on the farm is how farmers perceive the usefulness of adopting organic or ecological approaches within their farm system as well. And if they don't perceive it as useful, then they're not going to even start to adopt it.”

Even when farmers switched to organic farming they were divided into two groups, one which felt enabled by the supply chain and another who felt constrained by the supply chain.

Professor Barnes highlighted that a main trigger point for farmers when it came to considering organic farming or ecological changes was a disruption to the current status quo - an event that was currently happening as a result of the war in Ukraine and the resulting rise in inputs such as fertiliser and feed.

“My final point is really that what came out was that a lot of policy, a lot of our work is focused on the farmers,” Professor Barnes explained.

“But what came out from talking to the farmers is that they feel constrained by the supply chains that they're in, and the Farm to Fork strategy does explicitly talk about creating more alliances across the supply chain, and that seems to be a main barrier. If we can tackle that barrier, then we would hope to encourage much more uptake of ecological and organic practices.”

PANEL 1 - ORGANICS: WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE?

Speakers:

- Professor Helen Sheridan, Ecologist, UCD
- John Kiersey, Dairy farmer and member of RDS Committee of Agriculture and Rural Affairs
- Mark Gillanders, Irish Organic Farmer, IFA Organic Committee, Organic Flour Miller,
- Gillian Westbrook, MOPS: Maximising Organic Production Systems EIP, and CEO of the Irish Organic Association

Moderator:

- RTÉ broadcaster Damien O'Reilly

“What’s not to like about organics?” Gillian Westbrook, CEO of the Irish Organic Association (IOA) asked during the first panel discussion of the day.

She pointed out the system resulted in “better air quality, better water quality” and insisted that at some stage, especially in the face of increasing input costs, that “the penny has got to drop” for farmers that it was an economically viable option.

One farmer who agreed with her was Monaghan native Mark Gillanders, who made the switch from conventional beef production to organic tillage production several years ago. Moderator Damien O'Reilly, asked him why he'd made the switch, and Mark said that as his off-farm building work dried up after the Celtic Tiger he started to look at his farm as the asset it was and consider how he could make best use of it. Mark said he'd made the decision to switch to organic tillage and the move had enabled him to become a full-time farmer, with a business producing Irish organic milling flour.

Having undertaken a Master's in Organic Farming in Scotland's Rural College in association with the LIFT H2020 project, Mark's research into the challenges of conversion to dairy organics highlighted the need for all actors in the value chain (farmers, processors, research, advice, marketing bodies and policy makers) to move together to build supply, infrastructure, processing capacity and demand, all at the same time.

Damien asked him if he was making an income from the farm now and Mark responded that that was the main reason he was doing it.

“And it's become more and more interesting, because it's economically viable,” Mark added.

Taking a wider view of where organic farming sat in Irish agriculture, Professor Helen Sheridan from UCD said that farming had been going on in Ireland for the last 6,000 years and played a

pivotal role in shaping the landscape. However, she also pointed out that the specialization of agriculture had caused issues for biodiversity and a “happy medium” needed to be found.

Touching upon the development of this “happy medium” John Kiersey, Dairy farmer and member of RDS Committee of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, said that considerable work had been done by Teagasc in relation to multispecies swards where 60% of chemical nitrogen requirements in swards had been replaced by the incorporation of legumes and forage.

He pointed to barriers in the form of antibiotic withdrawal and the price of organic animal feed, when it came to farmers converting to organics and said that many would look to Teagasc for advice when it came to considering switching from conventional to organic.

Recipe for organic success

An example of where organics had succeeded was highlighted by Damien in the form of the Maximising Organic Production Systems (MOPS) project, a European Innovation Partnership) undertaken by the CEO of the IOA Gillian Westbrook and involved a number of horticulture farmers.

“We increased the sales in three years from those 11 farms by 112%. And we increased their trade amongst themselves by just under 400%. It was phenomenal. And really relatively straightforward to do.”
- Gillian Westbrook CEO of IOA on MOPS

Gillian said that a key part of the success of MOPS was continuity of supply and that even though the project had focused on horticulture that lessons could be learnt for the beef and lamb sector. She insisted that the industry had to go and talk to the market and create an “ongoing dialogue” and that she wanted to guarantee farmers a liveable wage for their work and produce.

Take-home messages

Mark: “We can expand in Ireland, we can find markets, we can do everything that is in the Farm to Fork Strategy. It is just a matter of getting ducks in a row.”

John: “We need the encouragement from the processors and the push if you like, from Teagasc and other advisors to get us over the line.”

Helen: “If we can reduce our reliance on inputs, I think it will certainly put farmers in a much stronger position and put the environment and the sustainability of our systems in a much stronger position.”

Gillian: “I think we really need to do it because the EU consumer knows what that logo means and they know it across the rest of the world so we need to go with it.”

**SLIDO QUESTION ONE TO
LIVESTREAM ATTENDEES:**

**WHAT IN YOUR OPINION NEEDS
TO BE DONE TO INCREASE THE
NUMBER OF FARMERS OR
GROWERS FARMING
ORGANICALLY?**

**36% - IMPROVE FINANCIAL
INCENTIVES**

**34% - INCREASE CONSUMER
DEMAND**

**25% - MORE SPECIALIZED
ADVICE FOR FARMERS IS
NEEDED**

**5% - IMPLEMENT MORE
ORGANIC RESEARCH**

WHAT IRELAND CAN LEARN FROM THE ORGANIC SECTOR IN DENMARK

Paul Holmbeck, former head of Organic Denmark

What Ireland could learn from Denmark in becoming a champion of organic produce was the focal point of the former head of Organic Denmark, Paul Holmbeck. He pointed out how both Ireland and Denmark had a similar population size and yet Denmark was a market leader in organic sales, with 80% of Danes buying organic produce every week. He said the land area under organic had doubled to 12% and the aim was to double that again by 2030.

“Every third litre of milk is organic and you almost can’t sell conventional baby food anymore,” he told the livestream event.

This success was not achieved overnight and Paul highlighted several policies and campaign issues the group had undertaken to ensure that consumers. He said that farm organisations had championed organics, which had helped to change the mindset of many farmers that it was a niche area. He also said that they had worked extensively with consumers, retailers, restaurants and cafés to highlight the benefits for organic food and produce.

Communication was key to all of this, including educating people about the environmental and animal welfare bonuses of organic farming. To this end, he said that 5% of the population of Denmark had been to an organic farm as part of a campaign to show-case organic farming to consumers and make them feel involved and knowledgeable about the process and highlight the animal welfare standards.

He said another motivating factor was providing free organic certification to farmers and developing a “cuisine label” for public kitchens that a national goal of using 60% organic produce in

“The national government provided financing to cities to finance their conversion processes and education in the kitchens and then we developed a cuisine label based on our national organic label and developed the label for restaurants and canteens,” - Paul Holmbeck

their cooking. Paul described this as a “motivating” factor that brought the wider agenda of eating more vegetables and creating more sustainable diets into play. He said that another key element was celebrating the people who had achieved the 60% target and showed a billboard with people from a public kitchen celebrating their achievement, and helping to make Copenhagen an “organic capital”.

Finally, he urged Member States to take action and invest in their NGOs and to look for game changers to increase organics because it had huge potential for farmers and wider society.

MAXIMISING ORGANIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR IRISH FARMERS

Dr Kevin Kilcline, LIFT H2020 and Teagasc

Teagasc’s Dr Kevin Kilcline is conducting research to tackle system challenges across the organic value chain and provide solutions to enable farmers to maximize opportunities for Irish farmers. He outlined how the majority of farmers in organics were suckler farmers and that currently there was a “truncated value chain”, where organic weanling cattle were exiting the system into conventional systems due to (a) the lack of capacity to finish animals for processing (having to buy in expensive organic feed as few farmers currently run ‘mixed livestock and tillage systems) and (b) limited processing capacity for organic animals in the current system. He said there was a clear value to organic systems in terms of higher premiums and environmental benefits but that challenges existed for the organic market and in the ability of the sector to attract more farmers.

The LIFT research undertaken quantified the level of leakage and showed that organic beef production generates greater value to the economy than conventional beef production. This value is generated not only for farmers, but for everyone who does business with farmers across the sector and the rural community. Therefore, leakage has economic impacts right along the value chain. The LIFT project also quantifies the environmental impact of leakage from the organic to the conventional value chain. Again, the environmental benefits of organic farming are important not only at individual farm level; they also provide environmental public goods to society as a whole.

Dr Kilcline highlighted the need for building relationships across the sector to foster cooperation rather than competitions, giving examples of best practice case studies from Harvard Business School such as the Bord Bia commissioned - [“Pathways for Growth”](#) ‘The Cooperation Model’ and An innovative Beef Value Chain - Goldberg, Ray A., Carin-Isabel Knoop, and Mary L. Shelman. [“Fiona Industries: Delivering Better Beef.”](#) Harvard Business School Case 906-405, October 2005. (Revised May 2007.)

“We talk about change in its different forms technical, social, economic and institutions. But ultimately, change is a social complex process and involves interaction of all these different stakeholders coming together”. The sector is young but expanding - “we have opportunities to develop vertical integrated value chains, producer groups, long-term contracts, information sharing and ultimately working together to build trust” Dr Kilcline said.

**SLIDO QUESTION TWO TO
LIVESTREAM ATTENDEES:**

**WHAT CAN BE DONE TO
IMPROVE MARKET ACCESS FOR
IRISH ORGANIC PRODUCE?**

**34% - MORE COLLABORATIVE
APPROACHES EG. PRODUCER
GROUPS, CO-OPS ETC**

**33% - INCLUSION OF ORGANIC
PRODUCE IN PUBLICLY FUNDED
CANTEENS**

**22% - INCREASED AWARENESS
OF THE BENEFITS OF ORGANIC
PRODUCE AMONGST DOMESTIC
CONSUMERS**

**10% - INCREASED
INTERNATIONAL MARKETING**

PANEL 2: FROM CATTLE DEALERS TO ORGANIC FARMERS - THE FUTURE FOR ORGANICS IN IRELAND

Speakers:

- Dr Stan Lalor, Head of Knowledge Transfer Directorate, Teagasc
- Joe Burke, Senior Manager, Meat and Livestock, Bord Bia
- John Purcell, Good Herdsmen - Organic Meat Processor
- Jack Nolan, Head - Organic Division, at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine

Moderator:

- RTÉ broadcaster Damien O'Reilly

The panel discussion opened on a positive note about the potential for organics in Ireland, with Head of Knowledge Transfer in Teagasc, Stan Lalor, saying that there was a lot of opportunity in the organic sector at the moment, and maintained an upbeat note throughout the discussion.

John Purcell of the organic meat processor, Good Herdsmen, joked that his family had been cattle dealers in the 1990's and had now made the move to organic farming, following the opportunity it offered. He also highlighted the stigma that had historically been associated with conversion and said his father had not spoken to him for six months when he'd told him he was making the switch, until he'd pointed out that his father had basically been farming organically in the 1950s.

He insisted that organic farming was no longer "niche" and that Good Herdsmen could not keep up with demand, with just 11,000 organic cattle killed every year out of the 1.7m cattle killed annually for beef every year.

"We're so short of organic beef at the moment that we just can't supply it. I go to all the shows and I have to say sorry, next year hopefully we'll have more volume," - John Purcell, Good Herdsman.

The moderator Damien O'Reilly, quizzed the senior manager of the livestock section of Bord Bia, Joe Burke about whether organic certified beef and the Protected Geographical Indicator (PGI) that Ireland was applying for was on a "collision course".

Joe insisted that there was no conflict of interest between the two and said Bord Bia was committed to supporting a vibrant organic sector.

The current take-up of the organic scheme has remained low and Head of Organics at the Department of Agriculture, Jack Nolan was asked why he thought this was. Jack said that as milk prices were good at the minute, farmers were more reluctant to make the switch but that it could potentially suit a lot of farmers. He said the average farmer with 44ha could get €9,000 a year in conversion but that one of the stumbling blocks that farmers were concerned about was meeting the additional space requirements in winter housing, in particular the lie back area.

In terms of the long-term outlook for meat, Joe Burke said that global forecasts showed that meat demand would grow by about 2% over the next five years, and that despite the rise in inflation and the war in Ukraine there were still affluent consumers searching for high value produce, such as organic beef. He said there was also a rise in flexitarians, who ate less meat but the meat they did eat was higher value. "They want it to be nutritious and ethical," Joe explained, saying that organic beef ticked these boxes for this type of consumer.

Take-home messages:

Jack Nolan: "My message to farmers is to inform yourself. Don't dismiss it [organics] like you would have in the past."

Joe Burke : “Input costs have gone up significantly. It’s not for everyone but it should be considered.”

John Purcell: “When I told my farmer I was going organic back in 1998 he didn’t talk to me for six months but I reminded him that he was organic farming in the 1950s.”

Stan Lalor: “We need to de-risk the change process. As an industry we need to look at the blueprints that we need to develop for markets.”

Summary panel: There’s an “organic boom” waiting to happen in Ireland

Speakers:

- Elena Panachi, Head of Organic Production in DG Agri
- Paul Holmbeck, former Head of Organic Denmark

Moderator:

- Damien O’Reilly

Despite the low percentage of land farmed organically in Ireland, the Head of Organic Production in DG Agri, Elena Panichi, said that she was “very impressed” by the ambitious target to reach 7.5% of organic land by 2030. She acknowledged that there would have to be change to reach that target and said that incentivizing farmers was part of the issue.

The former Head of Organic Denmark, Paul Holmbeck went even further and said that Ireland was on the cusp of an “organic boom”.

“My impression is that everyone is here,” Paul told the moderator Damien O’Reilly, and added that there was serious potential for the sector in the country.

“An organic boom is waiting to happen. It’s a deeply professional agriculture sector which has not embraced organics yet.”

Paul continued by saying that he thought a policy framework was missing and that there had to be a focus on certification and on getting political investment.

Take-home messages:

Elena: “Organics is a real option and people should go for it.”

Paul: “Opportunities are enormous for organic farmers.”

CLOSING REMARKS: ORGANICS IS A GROWING SECTOR

Professor Frank O'Mara, Director of Teagasc

Giving the closing address, the Director of Teagasc, Professor Frank O'Mara, said that organics was clearly a farming 'sector' in the country and echoing the thoughts of previous speakers said it was "no longer a niche enterprise".

He acknowledged that Ireland still had a low level of organic farms with just 1.6% of the land farmed organically but said the example set by Denmark, as outlined by Paul Holmbeck, was heartening.

Health and the environment were highlighted by Professor O'Mara as key reasons for consumers choosing organic and said he could see convergence between the conventional and organic sectors in farming and that both types of farmers had a lot in common.