

IRISH ORGANIC ASSOCIATION

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Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss

Irish Organic Association, 23 June 2022

1. The Irish Organic Association is a member-owned, not-for-profit company at the forefront of the organic movement in Ireland for the past 40 years. As a leading all-island organic certification and development body, we are committed to the production of food, feed and fibre based on the principles of health, ecology, fairness and care. We therefore welcome the establishment of the Citizen's Assembly on 'Biodiversity Loss' and the opportunity to make a submission on this important topic.
2. The Organic Food and Farming Standards in Ireland are underpinned by the EU organic regulations. The ongoing development of these regulations since 1991 has resulted in comprehensive standards that have evolved over time seeking to achieve greater sustainability at every stage of organic production.
3. The most recent assessment of the EU organic regulations highlights how specific production rules, based on a whole-farm system approach, are orientated towards respecting nature's systems and cycles and contributing to biodiversity as well as making responsible use of natural resources - energy, water, soil, air and climate [1].
4. Studies of biodiversity performance on organically managed farmland show that organic farming practices can benefit biodiversity in terms of species diversity and abundance across many taxa both above and below the ground. The most recent review of the research over the last 30 years concludes that species richness and abundance are up 35% and 55% higher on organic farms depending on the species [2].
5. Organic land management's positive impact on biodiversity below the ground concerns soil biology. This includes the presence of beneficial taxa groups and mycorrhiza fungi. Long-term field trials show that microorganism activity in the soil is higher and increasing over time under organic farming land management (organic and biodynamic) than under conventional methods [3-4].
6. Organic farming also places a strong emphasis on agrobiodiversity. As well as being beneficial for the environment, greater genetic diversity on organic farms, including intercropping, diversity within crops and the use of landraces can support pest and disease control, mitigate weed burden and support productivity. The use of livestock breeds more appropriate for low-input and predominantly forage-based systems is also an important consideration [5].
7. Research conducted in Ireland shows that organic dairy farming can have a positive impact on pollinators in intensively managed grassland areas. This can be attributed to practices such as a lower stocking density, and the non-use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, nitrogen fixation, which support more floral diversity. The research also shows that organic farmers are better informed and proactive about environmental issues on their

farms. The effects of organic farming on biodiversity could be further enhanced in non-productive areas (e.g., hedgerows and other landscape elements) with the right incentives and knowledge [6-7].

8. The role that agroecological approaches such as organic farming can play in supporting more positive impacts for biodiversity and ecosystem functions as well as helping to mitigate and adapt to climate change is recognised by both UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [8-9]
9. Special attention should be given to how the organic farming scheme can be more effectively combined with agri-environment-climate schemes including result-based payments to maximise its biodiversity protection and enhancement potential. Too often organic farmers are excluded from participation in relevant schemes or cannot combine organic and environmental payments due to often unjustified double funding concerns [10]. This undermines the additional and synergetic biodiversity benefits that organic and agri-environment-climate schemes in combination can deliver. It also sends a mixed message to the organic sector in terms of its role in contributing to Ireland's sustainability objectives and commitments.
10. Sufficient resources must be deployed to support an ambitious implementation of Ireland's *Strategy for the Development of the Organic Sector for the period 2019 to 2025* to ensure a more supportive environment for the development of organic food and farming in Ireland. For instance, investments in advisory and knowledge transfer are essential to support conversion to organic farming as well as increased biodiversity and environmental/climate performance on organic farms. This must also be backed by stronger efforts to further advance organic markets and supply chains, including green procurement. Such priority actions are critical in responding to the growing demand for organic produce both in Ireland and in the rest of Europe.

References

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