

Ireland

A small country with great organic potential

Historically Ireland is an agricultural country, and most people are still not far removed from their farming roots. Like many sectors the ebbs and flows determine the overall interest in the sector, and following the general downturn in the economy in 2008, agriculture has become one of the best performing sectors, which in turn has generated a renewed interest and attraction to farming.

Farming in Ireland is essentially a family business; according to the Agricultural Census of 2010 there are 139,829 farms with an average farm size of 32ha. Generally, the farms tend to be smaller and land more disadvantaged on the westward side of the country. The contribution of agriculture to the economy has continued to increase on the 2.5% GDP recorded in 2010, and is now around twice the EU average. Ireland has a population of just over four million, so in terms of agricultural output Ireland is a net food exporter. Agri-food exports currently account for 9 billion euros and the Government plans to expand this to 12 billion euros by 2020. In terms of the destination of Irish food and drink exports in 2011, the United Kingdom, at around 43%, remained the principal market with sales of just over 3.7 billion euros. Continental EU markets account for 34% of food and drink exports with a combined value in excess of 3 billion euros.

Land area and land use

The land area of Ireland is 6.9 million hectares, of which about 4.2 million hectares (64% of total land area) is used for agriculture, and 745,456 hectares (10.8% of total land) for forestry. Approximately 80% (3.36 million ha)

of agricultural area is devoted to grass (silage, hay and pasture), 11% (0.46 million ha) is in rough grazing and the remaining 9% (0.38 million ha) is allocated to crop production.

Beef and milk production currently account for around 58% of agricultural output at producer prices. Ireland exports 90% of its beef output, making it the largest exporter of beef in the EU and fourth largest in the world.

Organic farming in Ireland

The competent authority is the Organic Unit of the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM).

There are five control bodies:

- Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association (IOFGA)
- Organic Trust
- Global Trust
- IMO
- Demeter

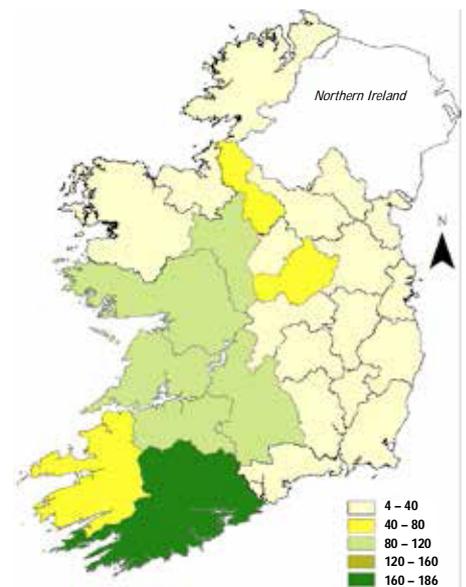
Out of these, IOFGA is the largest and longest running organisation. Established in 1982, IOFGA began operating a certification symbol in the late 1980s. The Organic Food and Farming Standards are used by producers in Ireland and have equivalency with the higher standards of private UK certification bodies. Currently there are 1,396 organic operators in Ireland, which translates

to 1.3% of utilisable agricultural land certified as organic, making it one of the lowest figures in the EU. There was a 31% increase in producer numbers in Ireland in the five year period 2007 – 2012, with 1,030 producers operating back in 2007 compared to 1,346 in 2012. In the Food Harvest 2020 policy document, published by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) the stated target is to increase area under organic management to 5%, however progress to date is slow.

Financial Support

As with all countries financial support is perhaps the greatest mechanism used to incentivise farmers to convert to organic production. At the time of going to print the sector is currently waiting for final approval from the EU Commission on the new Rural Development Plan (RDP). One scheme proposed in the RDP is the Organic

Number of organic producers in the Republic of Ireland (2012)



The Republic of Ireland – a small country with a great organic potential.

Farming Scheme, which is critical in attracting new entrants to the sector. Historically, payments paid to organic farmers in Ireland have been at the bottom of the table in terms of EU averages so an increase in payments (as proposed by IOFGA) is an integral feature of the proposed new scheme.

Organic farmers – sectorial breakdown

As in the conventional sector in Ireland, the majority of organic farmers are beef farmers. There are three main beef processors in the country, Slaney Foods, ABP and The Goodherdsmen, and via them approximately 75% of Irish organic beef goes to the export market.

Organic cattle statistics

In 2012 there were 981 organic beef farms and 41,381 organic beef cattle in Ireland. This represented an increase of 19% in beef farms and a 38% increase in cattle numbers since 2007. The table below shows an outline of some organic cattle statistics for non-dairy farms.

Organic cattle statistics for non-dairy farms in 2012

Beef farms:

Number of farms 981
Number of cattle 41,381

Suckler cow farms:

Number of farms 807
Number of cows..... 13,600

6 – 12 month old cattle 9,709
12 – 24 month old cattle 9,755

Source: DAFM, Dan Clavin Teagasc.

Organic beef finishers by range – organic and national in 2012

No. cattle finished/farm	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	81-100
% of organic finishers	85%	9%	3%	<1%	<1%	>1%
% of national* finishers	73%	13%	5%	3%	2%	4%

*national – conventional and organic

Source: DAFM, Dan Clavin Teagasc

Scale of organic cattle finishing farms

In 2012, half of all organic cattle farmers in Ireland (526 farmers), produced finished cattle, i.e. fattened stock ready for slaughter. The majority of these cattle came from relatively small farms, with 85% of cattle coming from farms where less than 20 cattle were finished per year (see table above). This compares to national figures, which include conventional and organic farms, that show more cattle tend to come from larger scale farms.

Supply deficits and opportunities

As the overall number of organic producers is small there are some obvious deficits in the supply base. Horticulture is one area where the production base is low and the country is dependent on imports. On average, 70% of the organic fruit and vegetables consumed in Ireland annually is imported. There is real scope to increase the amount of producers here to substitute imports.

Many horticultural holdings keep hens as they are a good additional income stream and there is a good demand for organic eggs. The manure is also a good source of fertility on the farm particularly in the absence of livestock. However, generally the number of farmers raising organic

Organic production

Census of Irish organic producers in 2012

Dairy: 28 dairy herds

Cereals: 156 farmers growing a range of cereals,

Sheep: 410 sheep farmers, farming 45,655 sheep

Horticulture: Approx 300 holdings growing a range of crops

Source: DAFM, Dan Clavin Teagasc

pigs and poultry is low. These operations are often uncompetitive as there is a heavy reliance on imported animal feed, which makes production expensive.

The majority of organic farms in Ireland tend to be mixed, which makes them more diverse and viable and less vulnerable to external forces such as weather issues or market prices. For example, a cereal grower will normally also finish beef and may have sheep, making them self-sufficient in feed while ensuring nutrients are recycled on the farm. However, many parts of the country are not suitable for cereal production, and so farmers have to use costly imported feed. It is clear that more cereal producers are needed in the sector

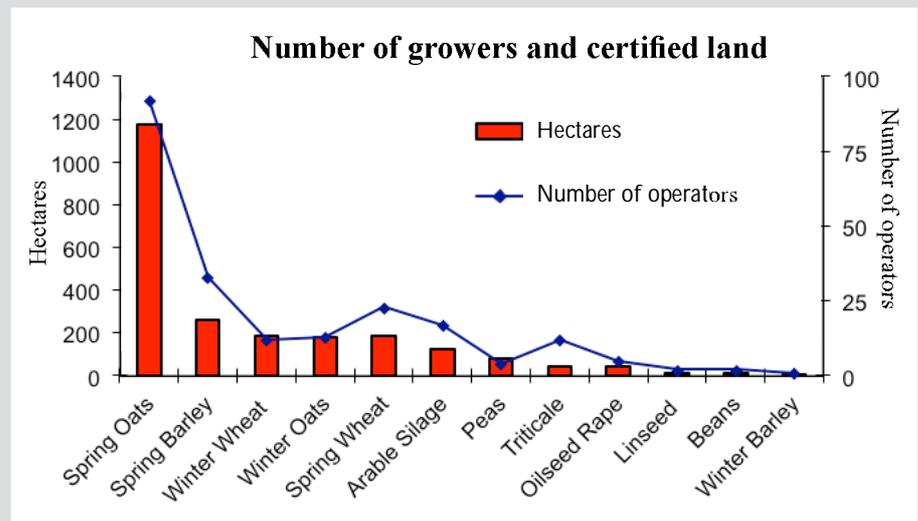
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RESEARCH SHEDS LIGHT ON DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ORGANIC AND CONVENTIONAL CROP YIELDS

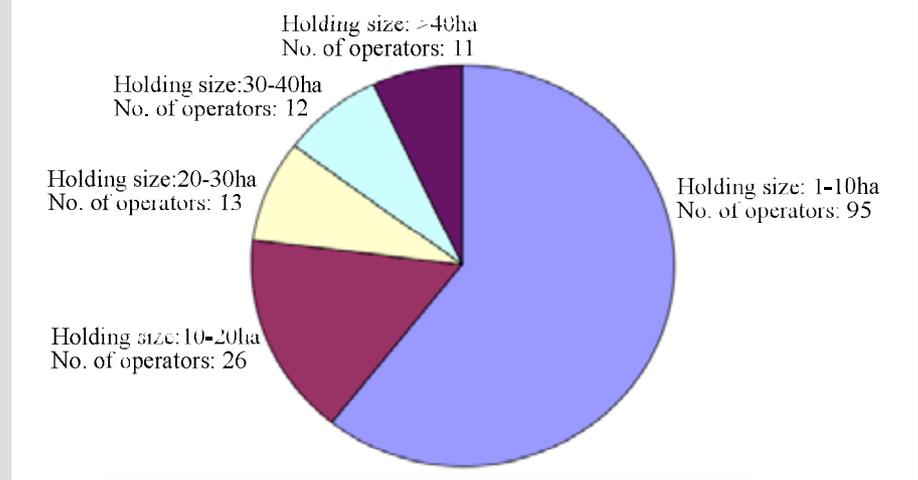
University of California-Berkeley researchers examined 115 studies that compared organic and conventional farming. They found that crop yields of organic agriculture are higher than previously thought. Furthermore, they discovered that certain farming practices, especially multi-cropping and crop rotation, could shrink the gap between organic and conventional production even further. Differences in yields varied depending on the crop type, with no significant differences between yields of organic and conventional leguminous crops. The study, *Diversification practices reduce organic to conventional yield gap*, was published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B. ■

The abstract and link to the full article (for a fee) can be found at: http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/282/1799/20141396?utm_source=January+2015+Newsletter&utm_campaign=UA-29297256-1&utm_medium=email

Organic cereals in Ireland in 2012



Size range of organic cereal holdings



to ensure a greater supply of home grown animal feed.

Clover

Ireland, with its temperate climate, is very suitable to growing grass and therefore the majority of organic animals are finished on grass. Grassland management is a very important skill necessary to be a successful organic farmer in Ireland. The better farmers have fantastic results from growing both red and white clover, which ultimately is an integral aspect of fertility

building and a source of animal feed on farms in Ireland.

Organic market

Bord Bia, the Irish Food Board, regularly monitors sales of organic food in the major supermarkets in Ireland. In 2014, it reported that sales were up 2% to just under €100m. While it is difficult to gather information on sales in other areas, Bord Bia estimates that 75% of organic food is purchased in supermarkets.

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NOSB TRAINING SLIDES POSTED

The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) is a federal advisory committee. Its members represent all segments of the organic community, come from all parts of the United States, and bring diverse perspectives and interest. On 24 January 2015 four new members were appointed to the board, and on 4-5 February attended an orientation training organised by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the National Organic Program (NOP). The three NOSB Officers also attended.

Topics covered at the training included: The Organic Food Production Act, Federal Advisory Committee Act, the petition and sunset process, the rulemaking life cycle, best practices for developing proposals and recommendations, and annual ethics and conflict of interest training.

Training slides are available on the NOP website; visit the NOSB Meetings page and select February 4-5, 2015 - Training from the drop-down menu. ■

Source: *NOP Organic Insider newsletter*, 24 February 2015

land while small, is very innovative, and a relatively high percentage of producers are involved in some form of direct marketing. For example, 10% of IOFGA members are involved in direct sales and 6% have developed on-farm processing facilities; compared to conventional producers these figures are quite high.

Farmers' markets have gained in popularity in Ireland in the past ten years and are a valuable outlet for organic producers. Online sales are starting to develop and show great potential for the future. Distribution of organic products is a challenge as producers are scattered around the country, however, this can easily be overcome with an increase in producers.

Export market

There is a growing export market for Irish organic beef. Currently the main markets are the UK, Germany, France, Switzerland and Sweden, however

Ireland has recently been approved to export beef to the US so there is potential for Irish organic beef to supply the US market.

Future growth

There is huge potential for the organic sector to expand in Ireland. The domestic market continues to grow and with it the demand for Irish organic food. Ireland has a fantastic reputation as a nation that produces high quality food, and this is also true of the organic sector. However, to fully realise its potential Ireland needs more organic producers. ■

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Sources:

Dan Clavin, *Organic Production Census Ireland 2012*, National Organic Conference Tuesday 5 November 2013, www.teagasc.ie/publications/2013/3103/Org_Prod_Census2012_DC.pdf



PHOTO CREDIT: GRACE MAHER

The Carlow Farmers' Market is held every week in the centre of Carlow Town, situated in the south east of Ireland. There are a wide variety of producers selling their fresh produce to the public. The market started trading in July 2004 in response to the needs of both consumers who wanted fresh, local and traceable food, and the local producers wishing to sell their produce directly to the consumer. More information at: www.carlowfarmersmarket.com