

IRISH ORGANIC FARMERS' AND GROWERS' ASSOCIATION

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PRE BUDGET SUBMISSION ON ORGANIC FARMING AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The key challenge of the next two decades is to stabilise atmospheric carbon dioxide to limit a global temperature rise by 2 degrees and avert catastrophic climate change. The global population is estimated to be in the region of 9 billion by 2050 which will place further pressure on food security and resources.

The recent extreme flooding in Ireland provides real life evidence of the social and economic impact from potential climate changes and the urgent need for realistic mitigation strategies. Commitments on food and farming have not taken centre stage in the lead-up to the Copenhagen COP15 Summit. There is however a growing awareness of the importance of the role of the agricultural sector, with food destined for EU consumers representing a third of their carbon footprint contribution, a clear and understandable concern is evolving.

Greenhouse gas emissions from the EU agricultural sector are estimated to contribute in the region of 20% of all greenhouse gas (ghg) emissions. In fact in the UK new research has shown that, once agriculture-related land use change (eg deforestation for soy production) is factored into the accounts/inventories, food and farming represents 30% of the consumption related greenhouse gas emissions rather than the previously accepted figure of 20%. [Note ¹] This figure of 30% would also be more realistic for Ireland.

To date the discussion in Ireland to reduce agricultural emissions has been focused on livestock-related methane emissions and nitrous oxide emissions from fertilised fields and to a much lesser extent the potential to generate energy from biofuels and the anaerobic digestion of animal wastes. However in recent months the focus has moved to the issue of soil carbon and its subsequently huge sequestration properties. In September 2009, EU Agriculture Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel called on European farmers to cut agricultural greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% by 2020, primarily by storing carbon in the soil.

¹ “ An assessment of greenhouse gas emissions from the UK food system and the scope for reduction by 2050 – How low can we go?” By Eric Audsley, Matthew Brander, Julia Chatterton, Donal Murphy-Bokern, Catriona Webster, Adrian Williams; a report for WWK UK and the Food Climate Research Network, 2009

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Soil carbon sequestration, according to the IPCC's scientific advisors on land use, represents 89% of agriculture's greenhouse gas mitigation potential. [Note ²]

Organic farming has higher soil carbon levels than non organic farming due to the farming practices involved ie, a system based on inputs of organic matter instead of using inorganic fertilisers, greater vegetation cover, mixed farming and the decomposition of organic material which produces more humus and increases soil carbon.

Recent research from the UK Soil Association estimates that the "widespread adoption of organic farming practices in the UK would offset at least 23% of UK agriculture's current official greenhouse emissions". [Note ³] The global potential for mitigating climate change from the widespread adoption of organic farming is extremely significant. A paper delivered to the IFOAM EU Organic Congress in Brussels on December 1st 2009 highlighted the following salient points:

- The 2008 US Rodale Institute for organic study estimated that up to 25% of all global greenhouse gases could be reduced if organic farming was the mainstream agriculture
- The FiBL (European organic research institute) 2008 study estimated the reduction at 9%
- The 2009 UK Soil Association study estimates the potential mitigation at 11%

While there is not an exact consensus on the potential mitigation percentage there is strong agreement coming from within the organic sector that the potential to reduce ghg's by carbon sequestration on a global scale is significant.

In Ireland we currently have 1,532 certified organic farmers, growers, processors and retailers. In terms of utilisable agricultural land currently 1.25% is certified as organic. For the past year the organic agricultural sector has remained strong despite pressure from the widespread economic recession. Organic farming being the

² Smith P et al. Greenhouse gas mitigation in agriculture. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London Series B Biological Sciences* (2008)

³ Soil carbon and organic farming by Gundula Azeez, November 2009

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only area within the sector that can demonstrate current and future growth, IOFGA would like to see the government in Ireland allocate serious resources to the development of the organic sector. This is essential in order to reduce our current dependence on importing organic food to meet the growing demand in Ireland. According to the latest research from Bord Bia, almost 75% of organic agricultural products consumed in Ireland are imported. The whole issue of import substitution is vital to reduce the carbon footprint of this organic food and to create more organic jobs in Ireland.

Conversion to organic farming in Ireland has been steady but relatively slow. The current target of 5% for Ireland is ambitious but achievable. Significant increase will be required if Ireland is serious in meeting its international obligations by reducing ghg emissions from the agricultural sector.

IOFGA would like to see the government implement the following proposals:

- Appoint a specialist Organic Horticulturist to the organic sector to offer advice and training to potential entrants to the sector. This would ensure that imports in the fruit and vegetables area would dramatically reduce
- Continue to support and offer incentives for farmers to convert to organic farming by maintaining the Organic Farming Scheme and the Capital Grants scheme for the organic sector
- Adopt a national strategy for large-scale soil carbon sequestration based on major development of organic farming, with a parallel approach to improve non-organic farming
- Convey to all farmers the importance of soil carbon sequestration and the impact that future agricultural and climate change policies will possibly have on this being set as a criteria post 2013.
- Promote the mitigation potentials that organic farming offers at the forthcoming Copenhagen COP15 Summit

The Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association (IOFGA) is the largest organic certification organisation in Ireland. It is responsible for certifying the organic provenance of its members produce and the IOFGA symbol indicates that a product has met the highest

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standard of organic integrity. IOFGA also works to inform the public about the benefits of organic food and to support the development of organic food production in Ireland.