



October 18 2019

Re: Agri-Food 2030 Strategy Public Consultation

Please find below a submission on the consultation for Ireland's Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 from Feasta, the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability.

We welcome the opportunity to make this submission and would be happy to respond to any queries at info@feasta.org.

Sent by email to: 2030strategy@agriculture.gov.ie

RESPONSE FORM

1. Details:

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Organisation where applicable: Feasta: the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability

Subsector:

Agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/>	Forestry	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fisheries	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rural Development	<input type="checkbox"/>	Food	<input type="checkbox"/>	Environment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Trade Union	<input type="checkbox"/>	Research / Think Tank	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Civil Society / NGO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Other: _____

2. Public Consultation Questions

Question 1

How important has Food Wise 2025 and previous strategies been in providing strategic direction for the agri-food sector? How do you think it could be improved in the new strategy?

According to the FoodWise ‘StepstoSuccess’ reports there has been considerable success in achieving the programme’s targets. Unfortunately, we believe many of these targets to be misconceived; for example, we believe the desired 85% increase in exports over the next ten years to be highly ill-advised, and probably impossible to achieve in any case. The reasoning behind this is explained in more detail below.

Question 2

Do you think that the five cross-cutting themes (environmental sustainability, human capital, competitiveness, innovation and market development) should continue to feature in the next strategy? Are there alternative approaches or themes that you would suggest?

The biosphere is the hidden infrastructure which supports our agricultural infrastructure. Rather than featuring five cross-cutting themes, we believe it would be more accurate for the strategy to make environmental sustainability the priority theme as the sector cannot function without a healthy biosphere, and at present, the biosphere’s health is disturbingly compromised[1].

We suggest that **food security**, on both a local and a global level, should also be included as a theme.

Another potential theme is **health promotion** (since nutritious high-quality food, produced in safe conditions, is essential to good health).

International competitiveness and market development are major themes at present but will most likely become less prominent in the future as the global economy contracts in response to hitting biosphere limits (this is discussed further below).

Innovation and human capital will continue to be important themes. We argue below that ‘grass roots’, locally-focussed innovation will prove vital in the future.

1. <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

Question 3

What do you think should be the absolute priority for the agri-food sector strategy to 2030?

As mentioned above, we believe environmental sustainability should be the absolute priority. Climate science strongly indicates that if we wish our children and grandchildren to be able to live decent lives, by 2030 we will need to be well along the trajectory to zero greenhouse gas emissions[2]. Significant steps will also need to have been taken to restore biodiversity[3]. This will require widespread and profound changes in agricultural practice throughout Ireland.

It is striking that in the 2018 ‘StepstoSuccess’ report there are five detailed pages discussing strategy in the event of a no-deal Brexit, whereas just three pages are devoted to sustainability, two of which are mainly taken up with nature photos.

2. https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/11/pr_181008_P48_spm_en.pdf

3. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/biodiversity/state-of-nature-in-the-eu/article-17-national-summaries>

Question 4

Do you agree that these are the most important challenges and emerging trends for Irish agri-food in the period to 2030? Are there others that should be considered?

Food security, which includes food sovereignty, will be a high priority in the future.

Food production and transportation will both need to be transformed in order to adapt to the requirements of renewable energy supply, which is intermittently available and has a low energy investment on return. The much-discussed Green New Deal will primarily be an agrarian revolution rather than an industrial one[4].

Supply lines of essential goods will need to be significantly shortened and farming within Ireland will need to become much more diversified in order to alleviate the impact of widespread stranded assets in the shape of dairying infrastructure.

Diversification could be a huge stimulus to Irish agriculture, would help to restore biodiversity if carried out in a sensitive manner, and would also alleviate the current problem of export-oriented food products being ‘dumped’ on Global South countries (and thus undermining the food security of those countries). It is also vital to preparing for (or responding to) a no-deal Brexit.

4. <http://www.feasta.org/2019/03/27/green-new-deals-yes-but-what-does-that-mean/>

Question 5: What do you think could be done to improve resilience to risks across the sector, from ‘farm to fork’?

To alleviate risk we would recommend:

- An urgent move towards the diversification of Irish farming, as stated above. This will entail substantial assistance in the production and marketing of locally-produced mixed farm products, with a focus on market gardening, agroforestry and small closed-loop farms.
- assistance for farmers who need access to land, for example by establishing (or providing support for) farming land trusts, along the lines of “Terre de Liens” in France[5].
- supporting the production of food seeds within Ireland. At present, most food seed in Ireland is imported, which diminishes seed diversity and can bring in diseases. Moreover, many imports are hybrid seeds which cannot be saved. Increased support for organisations such as the Irish Seed Savers Association, Brown Envelope Seeds, the Herb Garden and True Harvest Seeds would help to combat these trends.
- extensive support for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programmes and farmers’ markets. These can play a valuable role in increasing the profit margin for farmers, providing job security and increasing community involvement in sustainable agriculture.
- applying a hard and diminishing cap to the supply of nitrogen fertiliser, with its gradual elimination, by 2050 at the latest, from use in all forms of agriculture. This is explained further below, and more details can also be found in An Taisce’s, and the Pillar/SCC’s, submissions to this consultation. (A temporary exception might be made for ‘direct to human’ food crop production; further research is required to determine whether this is necessary.)
- results-based CAP payments to Irish farmers who need additional support in order to enable them to adopt or continue environmental practices. This is in the context of individual EU countries being given more autonomy as to the specifics of CAP implementation. Such payments might fall under the umbrella of the CAP’s RPAPS or EIP schemes. Care would need to be taken to ensure that they are truly results-based and there is no greenwashing involved.
- a change in emphasis in forestry from single-age monocultural plantations to diverse woodlands and agroforestry practice. Payments could also be offered to farmers who plant natural woodlands or who convert some of their land to wildflower meadows.

Feasta also advocates a number of ‘upstream’ measures to alleviate risk which are not within the direct remit of the Department of Agriculture, but which we wish to bring to your attention as we consider them to be as vital as those listed above. We would therefore encourage you to bring these suggested measures into the ‘Overton Window’ of debate with cross-sectoral colleagues. They are described in some detail in our Feasta’s 2018 submission to DAFM on the post-2020 CAP[6]:

- Applying and enforcing a hard ‘upstream’ cap on fossil fuel production and imports, in order to ensure that fossil fuel-derived emissions from Ireland are completely eliminated by 2050 at the latest. To avoid a rebound effect from this cap whereby more agricultural land is converted to biofuel production in reaction to the diminishing supply of fossil fuel, and to help ensure that overall agricultural emissions are reduced, we are now also advocating the hard cap on synthetic nitrogen supply mentioned in the list above.

(continued on following page)

- a Universal Basic Income for all residents of Ireland. This would have huge ramifications for the agricultural sector as it would make it far easier for young people to take up farming. It is further discussed under Question 12.
- The introduction of a land value tax to discourage speculation on land, to generate a secure source of revenue that could contribute to a basic income, and to ease potential inflationary pressures on land that derive from the existing CAP direct payments system (and that could potentially also derive from a basic income).
- Reforms to the financial system to ease the current pressure on the agricultural sector to constantly expand productivity in order to remain financially viable. Such reforms should include the development of a strong community and public banking sector in Ireland, which could provide significant help in the provision of finance to farmers and others in the agri-food sector. (The Future Growth Loan Scheme seems like a step in the right direction; however it would rely on existing payment providers, which have a shaky financial record.)

5. <http://www.feasta.org/2011/09/27/working-together-for-access-to-the-earth/>

6. <http://www.feasta.org/2018/03/23/feasta-submission-on-the-post-2020-common-agricultural-policy-consultation-process/>

Question 6

What do you think the vision for the sector to 2030 should be?

The development of a vibrant rural economy that employs a high percentage of young people, producing a wide variety of high-quality food using agroecological methods that regenerate soil, restore forest diversity, protect water, and provide food security for Ireland while mitigating climate disruption and restoring biodiversity.

Question 7

What do you think will be the most important contribution(s) of farmers/fishermen and the food industry to Irish society in the period 2020 to 2030?

Irish food producers will become responsible for the vital task of maintaining Ireland's food security as the economy transitions away from fossil fuel dependency. They will also play a major role in restoring biodiversity and mitigating climate disruption. Their actions will be crucial to our future.

Question 8

What do you think would be the key words that you would wish to associate with the agriculture, fishing, forestry and food sector in 2030?

Vitality, diversity (both in agricultural products and in the age and gender of those working in the sector), sensitivity, soil health, resilience, responsibility

Question 9

What can be done to improve the extent and rate of uptake of practices that improve water and air quality, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and protect biodiversity? What are the barriers to uptake of those practices?

As suggested in our response to Question 5 above (on risk), we believe a key barrier to agricultural sustainability to be the pressure on the sector to increase its productivity.

While the more recent European Commission statements on their objectives for agriculture in the EU have deemphasised productivity as a goal in favour of resilience - including both environmental and social resilience - in practice, those working (literally) on the ground in Ireland and elsewhere are still experiencing intense pressure to increase their quantity of output rather than quality, and to emphasise outputs that are environmentally damaging.

This pressure arises partly from the current dynamics of the financial system, hence our advocacy of the 'upstream' financial reforms which are mentioned in our answer to Question 5. It also arises from contradictory high-level EU policy directives, with the EU continuing to try and pursue 'green growth' as a key objective for the European economy despite overwhelming evidence that in the aggregate, green growth is an impossible goal[7].

Additionally, historical land reforms in Ireland, while well-meant, have encouraged a heavy emphasis on monocultural livestock farming, leading to high levels of exports of high-emissions dairy and to a lesser extent, beef[8]. Similarly, forestry in Ireland has become overly monocultural. There are strong cultural aspects to this situation which we believe need to be acknowledged and brought into question.

With regard to specific 'downstream' measures that could improve the sustainability of Irish agriculture, we briefly reiterate here the proposals suggested in our answers to question 5:

- assistance in developing Community Supported Agriculture and farmers' markets
- supporting seed production within Ireland
- aid to farmers in accessing land
- a cap on nitrogen fertiliser supply
- results-based CAP payments that encourage biodiversity and climate change mitigation

The other 'upstream' measures mentioned in our answer to question 5 are also important: basic income, land value tax and capping fossil fuel production.

An additional measure of vital importance would be a general discussion and reflection about the culture of Irish farming and how it can best adapt to changing times and circumstances. A Citizens' Assembly on the future of Irish agriculture could be useful in this regard.

7. <https://eeb.org/decoupling-debunked/>

8. This is discussed in the first chapter of *The Fair Tax*, ed. Emer Ó'Siochrú, published by Feasta and Smart Taxes, 2012.

Question 10

How can circular agriculture, the blue economy and the bioeconomy be integrated into the next strategy to build new value chain opportunities?

The circular economy will need to become the default economy. We believe its development would be greatly supported by the measures suggested in our response to question 5.

We are facing a climate and biodiversity emergency, and survival needs to be the priority; in practice this will largely entail reviving older and currently neglected 'value chain opportunities', such as produce from market gardening and small mixed farms. Essential food needs will need to be met largely within Ireland.

'Bioeconomy' is a confusing term as it seems to mean different things to different people. Feasta's 2017 submission to the Department of the Taoiseach's Bioeconomy Discussion Document argues that much greater emphasis needs to be placed on maintenance, stability and resilience when developing policy on the bioeconomy[9].

9. <http://www.feasta.org/2017/09/15/submission-on-the-irish-bioeconomy/>

Question 11

What do you think the main drivers and barriers will be for improving the economic viability and performance of farms, fishing businesses and agri-food businesses in the period to 2030?

Access to fossil fuel will be increasingly challenging in coming years, not solely because of the urgent need to eliminate emissions (and the possibility of a hard Brexit) but also because high-quality fossil fuel is becoming steadily harder to source globally[10].

This has huge implications for the agriculture and transport sectors and will require a rapid shift in focus; the future agricultural sector will no longer be almost entirely export-driven (although some exports will probably still be possible). As stated above, supply chains for essential goods such as food will need to be considerably shortened.

Again, we recommend the adoption of the measures listed in our response to question 5 to help address these challenges.

10. <http://www.feasta.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Feasta-submission-on-strategic-risk-assessment-in-Ireland-June-2019.pdf>

Question 12

Innovation is now widely recognised as a key driver of long-term growth and sustainable development. What type of approaches and processes could assist the Irish agri-food innovation system to address economic and societal challenges and facilitate increased networking, collaboration and investment in sustainable growth areas?

The future economy will require innovation that is highly adaptable to local conditions. Empowering farmers themselves, and others who are rurally-based, to be able to experiment and to share their findings amongst other farmers and the wider community, is therefore a high priority.

The organisations Food Sovereignty Ireland, Talamh Beo (an Irish affiliate of the Via Campesina, the international agroecological farmers' movement with over 200 million members worldwide) and Regenerative Farming Ireland are useful sources of information for farmers. The Red Gardens project at the ecovillage in Cloughjordan provides numerous online resources for horticulturalists, as does Grow It Yourself Ireland. Relevant horticultural training is also provided by The Organic Centre, The Organic College in Limerick, the National Botanical Gardens and agriculture and environmental programmes being run by Universities and Vocational Colleges.

The research carried out by the Irish Seed Savers' Association is helping to build the resilience of Ireland's agricultural sector while supporting biodiversity.

We recommend also that broader ecological agricultural training and education, such as that provided by the Holistic Management Network, be supported in order to bring about necessary agricultural changes: net sequestration of carbon in all farming as well as improved food production and biodiversity.

It may be possible to form collaborative partnerships between some of these organisations and existing KTGs.

Universal basic income (also discussed under Question 5) could also be a considerable support to innovation as it would relieve immediate financial pressure and provide greater freedom and flexibility to farmers and others in the agri-food sector to take risks and experiment. UBI is obviously not within the DAFM's direct remit; however it may be possible to adapt the existing direct payments system into a form of 'farmers' UBI'. This would differ substantially from existing direct payments as it would not vary according to the area of land being farmed (and so would be considerably more modest than the payments that some farmers currently receive), and it would require far less paperwork[11]. (It is noteworthy that Social Justice Ireland and the INHFA have also called for a basic income, although the latter's proposal would apparently apply only to those farmers who are currently in the Farm Assist programme.)

11. Feasta member Patrick Noble (based in Wales) has done some calculations on the potential basic income that could be available to Welsh farmers if existing farm subsidies in Wales were redirected, and came up with a figure of £7,183 per annum: <https://bryncocyn.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/a-midsummer-nights-dream-a4.pdf>

Question 13

What actions need to be taken to ensure Irish agri-food captures more value in both our domestic and export markets?

Please see our answer to question 10 above.

Question 14

Are there any other learnings or best-practice examples in other economic sectors or other countries that could be applied to improve the competitiveness and innovation of the Irish agri-food sector?

As stated above, we believe that competitiveness will no longer be a high priority in the future agricultural sector. There will be a much greater focus on cooperation and on food security.

We would strongly recommend the adoption of improved measurements of progress that are more accurate than raw productivity or GDP figures; one example is the National Well-being Index currently being developed by Feasta's 'Beyond GDP' group.

A number of countries are now reporting high (and climbing) rates of organic agriculture and that their agricultural sectors are moving in the direction of increased resilience. While such claims need to be verified, these countries' experiences may provide some useful lessons. Austria, Estonia and Bhutan are three examples. Additionally, the Sumac Kawsay ('Buen Vivir') philosophy, which originated in South America, may also provide useful insights.

Cuba, famously, was obliged by American oil blockades in the 1990s to bring about an almost completely self-reliant horticultural renaissance (in 2007, Cuba produced more food than it did in 1988, using about one-quarter of the chemicals. However, Venezuela is now selling synthetic fertilisers to Cuba, somewhat undermining this transition[12].)

Please refer to An Taisce's submission to this consultation call for a discussion of countries which are currently transitioning away from a livestock-based agricultural sector.

We can also learn from our own present and past, as much as from the examples of other countries. An expansion of horticulture will bring many people back to the land and could in a sense lead to a cultural renaissance of local produce in local towns and of the skills and learning involved. History also provides many answers, both for husbandry and distribution, in which we see many skilled people farming, cheese-making, milling, weaving, tanning, shop-keeping and so on. Best practice can learn endlessly from re-application, by trial and error, of those old best past practices.

12. <https://monthlyreview.org/2012/01/01/the-paradox-of-cuban-agriculture>

Question 15

What measures need to be taken in the period to 2030 to improve the social sustainability of Irish farms?

Please see our answers to questions 5 and 12 above, particularly in relation to basic income, site value tax and stabilising the financial system.

Question 16

Given the relatively slow progress being made in generational renewal on farms, what type of policies could be implemented to speed this up?

As with question 15, please see our answers to questions 5 and 12 above.

Question 17

Businesses are increasingly being measured by society not only on their economic performance but also on their corporate and social performance. What should the Irish agri-food industry be doing to address this? What key words would you wish to associate with a socially responsible agri-food sector?

Keywords: Courage, openness, equity, vision, respect, initiative, diversity.

Question 18

Societal concerns around ethical and sustainable practices, including animal welfare and the use of medicines and other inputs, as well as broader food and feed safety and authenticity concerns, have been growing in prominence and some have connected this with a social licence to farm/fish. How do you think the next strategy should address this to further enhance our credentials in these areas?

Animal welfare is inherently compromised by intensive over-industrialised farming. A move towards smaller-scale closed-loop mixed farming would help to address this.

As mentioned under Question 2, health promotion could be an appropriate cross-cutting theme for future strategy, and this ties in with food safety. A useful discussion of good practices in food safety can be found here: http://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/NSAC_Sustainable-Food-Safety_FINAL11.pdf The measures mentioned in section 5 would also be advisable in this context.

Links are increasingly being made between food (agriculture), climate change and health. The EU-funded Inherit project has some useful resources on this topic (<https://www.inherit.eu>).

Organic farming has a good track record both in animal welfare and in food safety, and it can also promote sustainability, particularly when combined with a local focus. Conveniently, it is also in high market demand.

A new results-based CAP payment could be introduced that would cover the costs of organic certification. This would help to bring down the prices of organic products and would socialise the cost of certification, rather than imposing it on farmers (and organic consumers) as is the case at present.

***Feasta (the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability)** is an ecological economics think tank. Its aims are to identify the characteristics (economic, cultural and environmental) of a truly sustainable society, articulate how the necessary transition can be effected and promote the implementation of the measures required for this purpose.*

It is a member of the Irish Environmental Network, the Environmental Pillar and Stop Climate Chaos Ireland.

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