



Paper of

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Introduction

I have been asked to tell you about my story as a farmer, what brought me to the various changes I have made and what has been the impact of these changes and what policy implications my experience points to.

My first outing as a farmer

I have had two lives as a farmer. The first came when I was about 19. I had had the benefit of a good education from the Cistercians in Roscrea for which I am still thankful and two years of an Arts degree in Maynooth. The plan had been to get a degree before tackling the farm. My father's deteriorating health brought me home earlier than anticipated.

In the early 1970s as Ireland joined the EEC, as it then was, my parents decided to invest in the farm. There was an EEC funded farm modernization scheme to help with reclamation and farm buildings. Our farm needed both big time. Apart from a series of fields along the front of the farm where the land was better and hay was made, the farm comprized two large grazing blocks with no internal fences and much scrub. Cattle drank from the Boora River and the drains leading to it. In the winter cattle were fed hay outdoors. There were no sheds of any significance.

The drainage of Lough Boora to facilitate peat extraction by Bord na Mona had lowered the water table on the farm and helped to dry out many of the marshy areas shown on the 1912 Ordnance Survey maps, but it had also exposed lengths of bog oak and rock as the land sank. Much of the farm was unsuitable for machinery as a result. On my return from college a plan for land reclamation and shed building to house cattle was drawn up with the ACOT (pre Teagasc) farm advisor and I started the 100hour winter farm school. The development work attracted grants but also necessitated borrowings. As my father was unable to attend marts, we also moved from a system of buying store cattle to buying in Friesian bull calves for a calf to beef system, then much in vogue.

In the two years while I worked with my father a block of 40acres was reclaimed and corn was grown on it. A five bay hayshed was erected with two lean tos and a feeding yard. Next came the silage slab and effluent tank. A second tractor, tillage machinery, a fertilizer spreader and sprayer were bought and I learned to apply the lessons of the farm school. The

first diversification happened then. We grew six acres of potatoes for a short lived Potato co-op in Tuam followed by carrots for processing in the Green Isle plant in Banagher.

In 1981, when my father died I borrowed more money to reclaim a further 35acs as planned on the understanding that my capital tax liability was negligible. 18 months on, Revenue did not accept our valuation of the farm and I had a much lower threshold for Capital Acquisitions tax as I was deemed to have received the farm from my grandfather rather than my father. What was a difficult financial situation became impossible. I had to get a job. The farm was destocked and a block of land was let to a neighbouring farmer. I kept on one part time employee to save fodder for sale and to develop a turf cutting business on the bogland at the end of the farm. So ended my first outing as a farmer.

My second outing as a farmer

When the farmer who leased the land from me died, I reassessed the situation. Much of the land that had been let was rough grazing and needed reclamation. Given the costs involved and the marginal nature of the land, I decided that forestry was a better option. I have always liked trees and had attended various conferences and events on the topic. I was also swayed by the writing of John Healy, the Irish Times political correspondent, who frequently argued that one should grow trees where it was the best use of land. The scheme of annual premiums with a fixed annual income made it an easy decision when compared with the vagaries of livestock farming. I engaged a forestry company to plant about 50 acres to a mix of species, depending on the soil type. At the same time, I happily indulged my passion for cooking in a small café I ran in Roscrea. Dissatisfaction with the work of the forestry company led me to a decision to become actively involved in running the farm again and I did not renew the lease on the café from Jan 1996. The forestry premium also provided seed capital for the purchase of some suckler cows. In 1996 I relaunched myself as a farmer/forestry worker and was surprised at how well I took to it.

Beginning an interest in Organic farming

To backtrack slightly, I had also begun a vegetable garden for home consumption in my late teenage years and had kept that going whenever I had access to a garden in the intervening years. Over time, I had read more about organic vegetable production and that led me to contact with organic farmers and vegetable growers. By the time I returned to farming, I had been gardening organically for five or six years. It was not a big step for me to think of farming organically. In my first farming life, I had been involved in setting up a Group Water Scheme in the townlands around the farm. I had the experience of farmers who didn't join initially who came to the scheme when they contaminated their own wells. In the end, the GWS lost its own well to farm pollution and it now draws its water from a county council supply. As a veteran of some Ballymaloe cookery school courses, I was very aware of food provenance. It was Darina Allen who introduced me to Silent Spring by Rachel Carson. As a farmer, who had used chemicals, as advised, for crop production and grassland management in the past, that book resonated with me. I knew how easy it was to create environmental damage. All of these experiences contributed to my decision to convert the

farm to organics. I also took the time to visit the farms of some of the people I had met at AGMs or other meetings of organic farmers. The more I saw, the more it made sense to me. Work began on an organic conversion plan and I applied to the Organic Trust for certification. We have been members of the Organic Trust some twenty years. You have asked about barriers or incentives. Neither had much bearing on my decision. My choosing organics was philosophical more than practical. I did not want my food contaminated with agricultural chemicals. I did not want the damage to water and soil that comes with agricultural chemicals. Nor the loss of biodiversity. It seems to me that the best way to care for the environment and respect the other creatures who share our space is to farm organically. I believe it is the only sensible way to farm.

Farm Enterprises on Lough Boora Farm

Suckler cows are the main users of our grassland since 1996. In our first year of organic farming we also produced barley, which we dried on farm and sold subsequently to an organic feed producer. Because our land is marginal for tillage, we did not repeat that. Instead, we introduced sheep to the mix, which necessitated a new round of fencing. Having a mix of sheep and cattle allows us better parasite control through rotational grazing. Areas which had been used for turf production were seeded with grass/clover mixes and brought into organic conversion when the turf was cut out. Most of these areas were subsequently turned over to forestry. Now the total area under forestry is 95acs. As a result, we reduced our suckler cow herd from 50 in 2005 to 33 today.

Other Diversification and related economic/ employment gains

The other major diversification on the farm was the introduction of an organic vegetable enterprise. Originally conceived as a way of paying for another person on the farm, this took off to the point where this year there are four people employed in the production of the veg and another three in the packhouse/distribution side apart from me. We started this with less than one acre and one polytunnel. Now we have about 10 acres in vegetable production and 7 large polytunnels. From the beginning, we focussed on selling directly. Our original 20 box scheme customers grew to more than 200 in a few short years. As farmers' markets re-emerged in the noughties, we took stalls in the towns we were serving. Many of the box scheme customers switched to shopping at the stall. I'm glad to say many of them shop with us to this day. More than two thirds of our veg production is still sold to the end consumer with the balance going to independent shops and some select restaurants. All our sheepmeat, apart from cull ewes, sells directly too and a growing amount of our beef production.

Other than laying down a network of farm roads, the physical structure of the farm today is largely unchanged from 1983 when my first outing as a farmer ended. Some new hedges have been created to subdivide the first large area reclaimed in 1979. The yard and sheds grant aided for housing cattle in 1980 were unfit for purpose by 2006. New slatted tanks were installed. Sheds were extended to cover the open yard and a covered dungstead was constructed. We have also built a vegetable storage and packing shed. The farm that produced only beef in the 1970s now sells beef, lamb and a wide variety of vegetables.

Instead of relying on the factory price on the day of slaughter, we set our own prices at a level that keeps our customers satisfied and keeps us in business.

Today the farm has no long term debt. We still make use of a seasonal overdraft. The farm that sustained only my house in the mid 90s provided for three households for most of the past decade. Today the wage bill is spread more widely. At the same time as we reduced our stock levels we have increased the income of the farm. Sales in 2017 are projected to surpass 2016 levels by about 10%. In West Offaly, regarded as an area of economic deprivation, money that's generated by us mostly in the area gets spent locally. People who have been attracted to work here make their homes here, send their children to the local schools and make purchases in the local shops. Our success ripples through the local community.

It has long been my view that what we have achieved can be replicated throughout the country. Towards this end we have participated in a Teagasc farm diversification video project. We have had farm visits from other interested farmers and growers and we have participated in the Organic Growers apprenticeship programme. I hope we have had some influence on the numbers of young people setting up as organic growers and finding local markets for their produce. I hope my attendance here today alerts more farmers and growers to the possibility of farming more sustainably and having more control over their own income.

Impacts on the environment and biodiversity

Our success in developing local markets for organic produce comes with all the environmental benefits of organic farming. There are no chemical fertilizers or sprays damaging the soil or making their way into watercourses. Farm wastes are composted safely and spread on the land in the spring when soil temperatures are rising and they are used to best effect. Visitors to the farm in early summer constantly comment on the birdsong. Working here to that soundtrack is a pure joy. Birds of prey, which are at the top of the food chain, are much more evident on the farm than used be the case. Many are successfully breeding in the area now. Since our oak woodland developed we have resident jays. Our tall hedges provide blossom for honey bees and other insects and berries for birds and mammals in the autumn. Organic farming provides myriad environmental benefits and reduces the possibility of damage hugely. And it produces safer food. There is no routine dosing of livestock on organic farms. Lower stock densities and rotational grazing reduce the burden of parasites and the need to dose. When lab results indicate a need to dose, it is permitted. For most of our 20 years in organic farming, we have not needed to administer wormers to either cattle or sheep. Mechanical and hand weeding of vegetables may be more costly but they eliminate any possibility of chemical residues arriving on the dinner table.

Lessons and thoughts from my experience

The purpose of today's meeting is to consider responses to climate change. Converting land from chemical farming to organics offers part of the solution. It is a less intensive, low input

system that produces safer food at realistic prices. The agricultural sector most at the mercy of the chemical companies is the tillage sector. Changing to organic cereal production would result in a yield reduction more than compensated by a price increase and the elimination of all the spray costs. Returns in the livestock sector are less certain unless you follow our route of direct marketing. There is a definite loss of output in the two year conversion period. The organic grant scheme is structured to pay more during the conversion period. Currently, that grant scheme is closed to applicants and the entire budget provided in the Rural Development Programme to 2020 is allocated. And there is a waiting list of applicants. There is no serious state backed research aimed at improving efficiencies in organic farming in the way there is for conventional dairying or livestock production. Organic farmers must take from that research anything that's applicable and learn from each other at farm walks or other gatherings.

Next week I will join a Bord Bia organised trip for organic vegetable growers to visit our counterparts in Britain. In their email inviting me to participate they state that they see an opportunity for increased import substitution of organic vegetables. They are right. But beyond that there is a huge export potential in Europe. Lough Boora farm may not be candidates for supplying that market due to our marginal soils. However, the organs of the State need a bigger vision for what's possible. And there needs to be political will to reallocate resources in favour of organics.

Changing land use from farming to forestry offers another part of the solution. Here the resources are in place. Yet the forestry programme 2014-2020 planting targets are not being achieved and I understand that farmers have a declining share of new plantations. There is plenty of land not capable of producing an economic return from livestock farming yet the owners persist. Achieving a cultural change, a change in thinking requires an effort akin to that mounted by the ESB for rural electrification and the support of the farming bodies. Restoring oak forests in the Golden Vale will require an enhanced forest premium scheme with much higher payments for the broadleaved species that will thrive on better land and a much longer premium payment period.

Ancillary farm projects which might play a part include the promotion of self-sufficiency in renewable electricity. Farms with rivers running through them may have potential for small hydro schemes. The technology of solar panels has advanced to the point where solar farms are planned. Positioned on the ground, these panels allow only sheep to graze. On dairy and cattle farms there tend to be more buildings for housing animals. These could be decked out in solar panels with some impact in terms of renewable energy. And small, less contentious wind turbines may also play a part. Again Government incentives will be needed.