

Environmental Pillar Interventions to the Agri-food Strategy Committee Meeting 12.03.2020

1. We received the email link to over 55mb of information and reading materials, with less than 4 working days to respond. This is unreasonable and is not conducive to facilitating useful debate and discussion on these very important issues. As there is so much in flux with the EU MFF budget, yet to be agreed, CAP budget and uncertainty around the UK withdrawal agreement, **we suggest a longer timeframe for the entire process**. We are unduly rushing a fundamental area of policy development, which will have wide ranging long-term impacts for our natural environment and rural communities in particular, but for everyone in Irish society and the way in which our food is produced and consumed in the future.
2. Thursday's meeting is focused on innovation, data and the bioeconomy and is a million miles removed from our goals on agriculture which needs to work within ecological boundaries. This chapter is closely aligned with the global marketing strategy of Bord Bia (the global good strategy) and would not be recognisable to most ordinary people. The future for Irish agriculture as laid out in this chapter is a franken-world of big tech which is out of touch with primary producers, food eaters and ecological boundaries. The mindset is just wrong - nature has been replaced by a bio resource to be exploited. Further, there is a shocking lack of consideration given to our food security.
3. The Environmental Pillar again recommends basing the next Agri-food Strategy on restoring the building blocks of farming in Ireland. That includes restoring confidence of farmers and giving them a fair price for the food they produce. It also means halting the losses and restoring soils, bird and insect populations, native plants, habitats, water quality of rivers, lakes, estuaries and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It means building a strategy on the key areas of biodiversity, climate and water and not isolating environment into a chapter on its own. This would promote policy coherence and reduce a silo-ed approach.
4. Two thirds of our regularly occurring wild bird species are in trouble in Ireland, one third of our 99 wild bee species are threatened with extinction, 40% of our wetland birds have declined in 20 years, 85% of EU protected habitats (the best of the best and internationally important) have 'bad' conservation status and 70% of those are negatively impacted by agriculture. Water quality is in decline and greenhouse gas emissions have not only increased, they are projected to increase further.
5. A guiding principle in Food Wise 2025 is that it " will seek to embed at all levels of the agri-food industry is that environmental protection and economic competitiveness are equal and complementary: one will not be achieved at the expense of the other". This social contract between the public and agriculture has been broken as all the environmental indicators are showing further declines except greenhouse gas emissions. This must be remedied.
6. Our members recommend developing the agri-food strategy in line with principles set out by the Cap4Nature project (<https://www.cap4nature.com/>).
7. The public consultation element of the agri-food strategy comprised an online survey. The results of this survey demonstrate that public concern for agriculture which supports and protects biodiversity and reduces climate impacts is greater than agriculture as an area of

economic growth. However, the chapters that we have seen so far have not reflected these concerns. Instead the standalone chapter on environment is meant to address these concerns whereas a fundamental rethink of how and what we farm in Ireland is needed. In order to support farmers with better prices for their food, a 'less is more' approach needs to be considered-less produce with a higher premium that has high nature value.

- a. Almost 60% of responses were from primary producers (farmers/fishers) and 56% working in/representing the agriculture sector
 - b. 47% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that 'Food Wise 2025 is delivering on its vision of thriving producers and agri-food business'. Only 18% either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
 - c. Environmental Sustainability and Human Capital were the highest ranked themes for the next AgriFood Strategy with 110 out of 212 respondents ranking environment as the most important theme- with a significant margin between it and the next ranked theme (43 points for Human Capital).
 - d. In relation to the importance of the contributions of farmers/fishers to society- protecting biodiversity, water and climate came second and third to ensuring safe, healthy food.
 - e. Tackling climate change, protecting and improving biodiversity and improving water quality are the top three priorities for the next 10-year strategy to address at primary production level.
 - f. Low profitability is the key area of focus needed for generational renewal and new entrants. This deserves significant attention. The current form of agriculture is very heavily reliant upon expensive inputs which can be very damaging to the environment. *Less Is More report*. Ramped up payments for ecosystem services which would handsomely reward farmers for the work they do in protecting and restoring ecosystems through the right grazing management systems would be a good area of focus on the new Strategy. Support for diversification where appropriate and additional crops on the right soils must receive attention. Increasing uptake of farming means better prices for the primary product that farmers produce. Maybe we need Less produce and for it to garner a higher premium.
 - g. Environmental sustainability also ranked as the number one concern for processors as consumers are demanding this. But this must be real sustainability and not fake.
8. Composition of the Agri-Food Strategy 2030 Committee: The Environmental Pillar sought greater representation of the environmental sector on this committee, including experts in climate science, biodiversity and water to ensure that these concerns were reflected in the strategy document. **The industry-heavy committee is reflective of the Department's 'business as usual' approach and not representative of the responses in the public consultation.**
9. EU Bioeconomy policy has created an exaggerated expectation at the potential of bioenergy and biobased material like corn starch or cellulose to replace fossil fuel energy and petroleum-based materials. This is reflected in the Irish Bioeconomy strategy adopted in 2018 (link to Environmental Pillar member An Taisce's submission on this strategy here: <https://assets.gov.ie/2523/301018150640-783418f89ed44a12a8a744077ea88083.pdf>).