

organic

Organics – the road less travelled

Once seen as exotic, organic dairy farming is now regarded as an economically viable option

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May this year marked my 20th anniversary as a Teagasc advisor. I spent the first five years in west Clare working as a Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) advisor and the last 15 years working in Limerick primarily as a dairy advisor. I have worked with great farmers and witnessed how dairy farming has evolved.

Until 2015, most farmers had 60 to 80 cows within numbers static due to quota restrictions. Then in 2015, with the removal of milk quotas, numbers began to creep up; in many instances without major planning.

The farmers with 60 cows found themselves with 70 cows in 2016, 80 cows in 2017 and so on until one spring, a few years later, they found they had calved down 100 cows. Many were scratching their heads wondering: “How did that happen?”

During the noughties, many dairy farmers held on to a good few beef

calves as “a way of gathering a lump of money at the back end of the year” to pay the taxman. After 2015, many of these calves found their stay was cut short and left the farm as calves; their place having been taken by the extra dairy cows.

When the 60-cow farmer hit 70 cows, there was no noticeable difference in stocking rate as the 10 extra cows were eating the grass that the 40 calves had been eating.

By the time the same farmer hit 80 cows they realised they were struggling to grow enough grass to keep ahead of the cows. Previously a round or two of nitrogen could be skipped, they now had to follow the cows religiously with the bag to the acre.

Then, less paddocks were skipped for bales and silage became slightly tight, but they always managed to find 20 acres down the road to rent for silage the following year.

This pattern continued until that spring morning when the farmer realised he, or she, had calved down 100 cows. The upside, of course, was that the milk cheque had grown in line with the cow numbers. The downside



was that costs had grown at an even greater pace, especially the feed and fertiliser bills.

The other major downside was the hours worked had risen dramatically and, with it, stress levels increased on many farms.

I recall a farming client of mine in his early sixties calling into my office (post 2015) telling me he was thinking of milking another 20 cows the following year.

He was a single man making a decent living. This man, or woman, was already milking 80 cows but would have been relatively lightly stocked and felt he could easily have carried the extra 20 cows.

His yard was well set up for 80 cows with 80 cubicle spaces, a 10-unit parlour and adequate slurry storage.

The extra investment to carry the extra cows would have been considerable and it would have taken a good few years to get that investment back.

After teasing the issue out with him, I asked him one question: Why? And he could not answer me. Sometimes, when everyone else is going in one direction, the logical thing to do is to follow them. To me, observing my cli-



Joe Kelleher discussing organic farming at a recent meeting of the K18 discussion group in Middleton, Co Cork.

Seamus Ahern, (Organic Farmer) Ballysimon, Middleton, with Joe Kelleher.



ents from the outside, cow numbers, milk cheques, bank loans, feed bills and fertiliser bills were going up, but the quality of life was coming down.

I really admired the farmers who went against the grain and took different paths: the 50- to 60-cow farmers who stayed at this level despite opportunities coming their way, those who went once-a-day milking and those who employed more labour than many thought they needed. They all did it primarily for one reason, because they valued their own time and wanted a good quality of life.

Many of these farmers who added on extra cows are now at a different stage of life. They may have children put through college and, in many cases, may not have an identified successor.

They have taken on the challenge of milking the extra cows and many have enjoyed the challenge of doing so but now are ready for the next challenge. I believe organic farming could be the challenge many farmers are looking for.

Growing 13t of grass DM/ha is being achieved by many dairy farmers across the country, albeit with a

heavy reliance on chemical fertiliser, but growing 10t with no chemical nitrogen is a challenge that really excites me.

We have numerous examples in research stations where yields of 10t DM/ha are being achieved using tools such as white clover, red clover and multispecies swards.

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A dairy farmer with monocultures of ryegrass may have to reduce their stocking rates to 1.0LU/ha under organics because ryegrass is heavily reliant on chemical nitrogen to grow the large volumes it does grow.

More diverse swards rely on the symbiotic relationship between the plants in the sward, especially the

clover, the drive the good growth rates being achieved. With diverse swards with good levels of clover content, a stocking rate of 1.5LU/ha should be possible.

For the national average farmer with 80 cows, this would mean cutting back to 57 cows.

The national farm survey indicates that this 80-cow farmer is spending €20,000 on fertiliser per annum. If this bill is eliminated/or reduced and we get a bonus of 5c to 10c extra for our milk, coupled with the organic scheme payment (€220/ha in conversion and €170/ha when converted) then maybe this same farmer's bottom line mightn't look much different to what it does now.

The upside to all this is that the farmer is now milking 23 cows less, spending less time in the parlour, has much reduced hours, has adequate cubicle and slurry space and the carrot on top is that they have reduced their carbon footprint by almost 50%.

If you have dreamt of getting back to the cow numbers you had pre-quota then perhaps it is time to stop following the herd and choose a path suits you and your farm.