

**Third Report**  
**from**  
**The National Steering Group for the Organic**  
**Sector**

**August 2006**

### Foreword

In presenting this third report from the National Steering Group for the Organic Sector, I would like to take this opportunity to thank, once again, all those who contributed to the further development of the sector during 2005. I would especially like to thank all those on the Steering Group for their excellent work and endeavours during the course of the year in the promotion of the sector. In my previous reports, I was able to mention that a lot of progress had been made in the sector since the Steering Group was established, while stressing that there remained a lot more to be done in the future. I am pleased to report that further progress was made again during 2005.

I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the Steering Group to thank a number of bodies and individuals who have contributed to the continued development of the Organic Sector in Ireland. Since her appointment as Minister for Agriculture and Food, Ms Mary Coughlan TD has shown herself to be committed to the development of the sector and has recognised it as an area with potential to grow over the coming years. Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Food and Horticulture, has also promoted the sector at every available opportunity and he takes a keen interest in the workings of the Steering Group.

Once again, the staff within the Organic Unit of the Department of Agriculture & Food have been very dedicated in their work and have been very helpful at all times during the year. A special word of thanks to Frank Macken who moved on to pastures new during the year. His enthusiasm and good humour will be sorely missed. On behalf of the Group, I would also like to express my appreciation to John Fox, Michael O'Donovan, Tony Reid, Oliver Healy, Jim Carew, Niall Ryan, William Murphy, Eddie McAuliffe and Kathleen Walsh. They in turn have worked closely with the three registered private organic certification bodies IOFGA, Organic Trust Ltd and Demeter Standards. The open and businesslike relationship between the Department of Agriculture and Food and the private bodies is very much to the benefit of the organic sector as a whole. I would like to thank IOFGA, Organic Trust and Demeter Standards for their continued good work.

Teagasc have also shown a dedication and commitment to the development of the organic sector over the past numbers of years and continued to do so during 2005. Ger Shortle of Teagasc continued as Chairman of the Partnership Expert Working Group and among other achievements, and with the help of others, ensured that the demonstration farm programme for organic farms was a major success during 2005. John Reidy has also been a great servant to the sector and I wish to sincerely thank him for his massive contribution over the past number of years. Thanks are due also to Dr Tom O'Dwyer, Chairperson of Teagasc, and to the Director, Jim Flanagan, for their continued support.

Finally, I would like to thank Bord Bia sincerely for their continued support for the sector over the year. In particular I would like to thank Lorcan Bourke, Chairman of the Organic Market Development Group, for his enthusiasm and commitment to the sector. Bord Bia played a major part in making the inaugural National Organic Week a success.

I look forward to continuing our good work into the future and hope for further development and progress in the year ahead.

**John Duggan, Chairperson**

### ***National Steering Group***

The terms of reference for the Group are as follows:

*To oversee and monitor the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Report of the Organic Development Committee and provide a basis for advancing the partnership between the organic sector and the other principal essential interests.*

### **Background and Current Structures**

The National Steering Group for the Development of the Organic Sector was established on foot of a recommendation in the Report of the Organic Development Committee, published in April 2002. The Group met three times in 2005, making a total of eleven meetings since it was first established. The Steering Group has already implemented the main recommendations of the Organic Development Committee report and continues to monitor the implementation of the other recommendations.

Under the terms of the Organic Development Committee Report, the National Steering Group was originally set up for a three-year period, up to the end of 2005. The Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mary Coughlan TD, has re-established the Steering Group for another three years and has reappointed Mr John Duggan as Chairman. The Minister has also agreed to the re-appointment for a three-year period of the two additional sub-groups, the Partnership Expert Working Group (PEWG) and Organic Market Development Group (OMDG), which are chaired by Teagasc and Bord Bia respectively. She also asked to strengthen the processing and retail representation on the Steering Group and this has been done.

The National Steering Group, the Partnership Expert Working Group and the Organic Market Development Group comprise of a wide variety of various stakeholders from the organic sector, along with Department of Agriculture and Food (DAF), Teagasc and Bord Bia personnel. The partnership approach has proven to be a very successful element in the development of the sector in the past. All three Groups have been very active and played their part in this development.

### Action by various stakeholders to date

Achievements since the establishment of the Partnership Expert Working Group and the Organic Market Development Group include:

- A National Organic Conference was held in Portumna in October 2003
- Bord Bia carried out research on consumer attitudes to organic food in 2003
- A National Production Census for 2002 was published in 2004. This was the first census of its kind undertaken for the organic sector and provided much needed data on the size of the individual sectors.
- The Demonstration Farm Project commenced on a pilot basis in 2004. The objective was to provide an opportunity for both existing and potential organic operators to visit first-class facilities and see production and management techniques at first hand.
- There is now a dedicated organic section on the DAF website where information on all aspects of organic food and farming is available - [www.agriculture.gov.ie/organics](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/organics)
- Changes in the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) in 2004 designed to encourage more farmers to enter the organic sector - partial conversion was introduced to encourage the expansion of the sector. Also it was made easier for farmers to maximise payments at the in-conversion stage.
- Statutory Instrument introduced in March 2004 gave DAF officials powers of enforcement under the EU Regulations governing the organic sector
- An information leaflet was launched in September 2004. *This Guide to Organic Food and Farming* was developed to address this information deficit and to inform consumers, in an easy-to-read format, about organic food and farming, tell them how to recognise it and where they can get it, and explain why it sometimes costs more than products that appear similar.
- Poultry Report published in May 2004
  - It was felt that research within the organic poultry area was a priority because of concerns with poultry nutrition. The objectives of this study were to compile a report detailing the problems facing the organic poultry sector and to make

recommendations as to areas of research that could address and provide solutions for solving difficulties in the sector.

- Support for An t-Ionad Glas distance learning initiative
  - The ODC Report recommended the further development of existing advisory and information centres and that a full range of courses be established to meet the needs of the organic sector. Following discussions with An t-Ionad Glas and Limerick VEC, it was agreed that a feasibility study should first be carried out before consideration would be given to any funding options. As a result of the positive feedback from the study, the DAF agreed to provide grant assistance towards the costs of implementing a two-year pilot project on distance learning.
- Trials of barley, wheat and oats using commercial and older varieties carried out by DAF
  - DAF trials of modern and heritage varieties of cereals had their 2<sup>nd</sup> year on a number of organic farms around the country. When these are harvested in autumn 2006 there should be enough data to issue recommendations regarding the selection of varieties for organic cereal production. This information is keenly awaited by Irish organic farmers.
- Establishment of five-year organic beef and grassland research project at Johnstown Castle
  - The organic unit at Johnstown Castle Research Centre was enlarged by 25% to 60 hectares and a five-year organic beef and grassland research project was established there. The first crop of calves from the project-breeding programme were born in spring 2006 and these will be followed through to slaughter in 2007 and 2008. A Walsh Fellowship Master's student is nearing completion of his trial work on clover establishment techniques for organic farms.
- Development of FETAC Organic Horticulture Course by Wexford Organic Centre and Teagasc in consultation with stakeholders
  - DAF identified a gap in organic education and decided with the co-operation of industry stakeholders to address this deficiency, including those bodies who currently provide organic education: Teagasc, An t-Ionad Glas, The Organic Centre, Wexford Partnership and FETAC. A plan to progress the development of the course was agreed and Wexford Area

Partnership intend applying for formal FETAC accreditation for the course in 2006.

- Considerable progress was made in providing agronomy expertise to tillage and horticultural producers and advisors.

### **Progress in 2005**

The demonstration farm project continued to attract interest in 2005. There was a greater geographical spread of farms than before and the general feedback was positive. The biggest project of the year was National Organic Week, which ran from 7 to 13 November 2005 and was co-ordinated by Bord Bia. The objective of the week was to raise awareness among consumers as to what is meant by organic food, its benefits and where to buy it. There was widespread coverage of the event through the national and local media, with advertising and competitions running throughout the week. Also Bord Bia produced an information/recipe leaflet that was distributed at retail level. Posters and window stickers with the slogan "*Think Organic*" were also widely available. Many Féile Bia restaurants included organic dishes on their menus. A survey conducted following Organic week found that advertising awareness for organic food across the various media increased by 13%.

A comprehensive organic market channel study commenced in 2005 and the results of this will be published in 2006. Also the DAF provided funding to an t-Ionad Glas, Organic College, Dromcollogher, Co Limerick for the delivery of four training modules through flexible/distance learning on a pilot basis for two years, 2005 and 2006. Initial feedback suggests that this initiative is proving to be a success.

As farmers look for alternative enterprises in the wake of decoupling, organic farming offers a genuine opportunity. There are early signs that farmers are coming to realise this. It is encouraging to note that 2005 saw increases both in land areas and in the numbers of organic operators registered with DAF. The total area in conversion or with full organic status rose by nearly 5,000 hectares to 35,266 hectares in 2005, which was an increase of some 15%, and the number of organic operators went from 1,004 to 1,090.

## Appendix 1

### Review of Expenditure 2004 V 2005

	2004	2005
Total REPS payments to organic farmers	€ 3,937,678	€ 5,893,999
(REPS Supplementary Measure 6 <sup>1</sup> payment only)	(€ 1,851,204)	(€ 2,202,805)
Grant Scheme	€ 167,562	€ 468,176
Inspection Costs	€ 120,755	€ 138,182
ODC Costs <sup>2</sup>	€ 112,340	€ 232,231 <sup>3</sup>
2005 Total	€ 4,338,335	€ 6,732,588
Total no. of organic operators	1,004	1,090
Total no of producers in REPS	518	619

<sup>1</sup> Supplementary Measure 6 of REPS is the undertaking related to organic farming, for which the farmer gets a special payment.

<sup>2</sup> Implementing the Recommendations contained in the Report of the Organic Development Committee (ODC)

<sup>3</sup> Includes National Organic Week