

**IRISH RURAL BUSINESS SOLUTIONS**

***Food Strategy 2025  
Questionnaire  
Annex G***

***IRELAND'S LONG-TERM ROLE  
AS A FOOD PRODUCER***

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## IRELAND'S LONG-TERM ROLE AS A FOOD PRODUCER

I spend more than a little time thinking about the future of food production and agriculture. It has just a part of what I do. It is about reading and listening and rationalizing all manner of information. It is not about economic modelling as that in itself is too constrained by limiting the parameters that have to be set to create a working model. It is mainly about logical thinking.

Hence some thoughts on one of my favourite subjects, where are the food and farming sectors going; not least when faced with the projected continuation in population growth. And what role will Ireland play in supplying this expanded human population of say nine billion by 2050.

Personally I do not buy into the idea that the market will just absorb whatever food that is produced. I also do not buy into the simplistic assumption that population growth will be accompanied by an exploding middle class with greater disposable incomes to spend on more 'sophisticated' food products. Limited resources and their rising prices will have an impact.

It is inevitable that within the 2050 time frame, 'industrial' agriculture will play a major role in food production. The presence of vast mono-cultures that produce oils and cereals are as likely as not inevitable for the foreseeable future. Likewise industrial production of lower-quality [at least from eating and animal welfare perspectives] animal proteins are a near necessity for feeding the great urban populations. And as to fruit and vegetables, we will continue to move them around the world until such a time as their transportation becomes too costly.

So where does Ireland fit into this largely industrialized food environment. Clearly from reading its recent national agri-food strategy, it has pretensions to being a global player. Equally as clear from a rational evaluation is that it does not have the resource base and farming scale to do so.

My viewpoint is that Ireland's primary attention should remain on the UK and the EU. Within these market it needs to have a twin-track approach that increasingly focuses on genuine premium products whilst recognizing that it still has to find a home for its farm production that is best suited to what one can call premiumised commodities. The latter is a recent success story but it is only a stage in the long road from commodity producer to product creator.

Beyond the EU the focus should be on producing premium products for North America, the Middle East and the premium niche markets in countries like China, India, Brazil and Russia. With the latter the word niche cannot be under estimated. The idea that has been so heavily promoted within recent agri-food strategy that Ireland can be a major player within the global food markets is a flawed one and one that has led to the serious strategic misdirection of recent years. It is a flaw that Ireland's farmers will pay heavily for in the immediate future.

The UK is the author's home market and it is one that he follows closely. Although Ireland's beef farmers have struggled in recent months due to, in part, the UK market's desire for British beef first, changes within the food markets in the UK should be far from negative for the Irish in the long term. It is about taking a positive approach to creating the right products for the market.

Recently I found myself watching a UK television programme on the how we will produce food in 2050 for the projected nine billion human residents of the planet. Two things caught my attention. First was the idea that food could be reduced to its basic components and provided in the ultimate food-is-fuel form. As was highlighted, this of course ignores all of the other pluses that food consumption brings to the lives of many of us humans. Second, the

TV show highlighted various initiatives to grow food within the city environment. The latter I found more appealing but one realizes that it has limitations, chiefly with regard to traditional protein foods.

The production of vegetables and some fruit and herbs certainly appears to be a lifestyle choice these days. True it is limited by land access within the modern urban environment but one reads of long waiting lists for allotments and the creation of new allotments on the urban fringes. However novel solutions for community gardens in all sorts of locations and 'high-rise' growing seem to be moving ahead. When there is a demand it is surprising the ingenuity which people apply to finding solutions. Local growing seems to be a problem that people are solving.

I can see this trend as being important to Ireland, located as it is as Europe's off-shore, clean-environment food-producer. My rational is that food-source awareness and the desire to grow-your-own will continue to increase. It is not necessarily about growing cheap food; it is about knowing your foods' origins and reconnecting with that most basic of activities; producing it. If you cannot do it yourself, it is about keeping it local [but within the context of availability and affordability]. In this respect Ireland, adjacent to serious northern EU markets, is well placed.

As an aside, what is the demographic of these people? I suspect that they are often towards the upper end. I also suspect that they are creating a trend that others of a similar ilk around the World are likely to follow. Hence, create a product for one market and you may well create one for others. With Ireland's small-scale, family-farming structure these are the customers that these farmers need for their products if they are to find a sustainable future for themselves.

In urban locations solutions for grow-your-own are possible but they are likely to be suited only to the production of, roughly in order resource need, salads, herbs, vegetables and fruits. The limitations on land access means that the production of proteins within the urban environment is difficult; at least within the context of most protein-providing foods as we now know them.

The target for Ireland should, therefore, be to produce a range of minimally-processed dairy and meat products that are highly complementary to what can be self and locally grown. They will not be grown as locally as many would desire but they could be grown in a fashion that is highly sympathetic to the desires of the issues-aware food consumers. The author believes that the farming systems required to create these products would also be very much in tune with the farming communities of Ireland and the resources that they have available to them.

The fragmented land and small farms are often cited as a disadvantage to Ireland. They are if you try to compete head-on with the global players that have vast farming resources. But are they such a disadvantage if you are producing and selling products that have a provenance that highlights their family-farming origins? Especially when the food products' characteristics also encompass a multitude of other characteristics that appeal to the issues-aware consumer?

One cannot deny that much of the growing and rearing of food in an 'alternative' way can be labour intensive [it is not an issue where growing is a part of a new lifestyle] and this will be a hindrance to those who wish to develop local food products in a rural UK where housing prices are out of reach of those who may wish to work in agriculture and food. It is less so in Ireland. The consolidation and 'industrialization' of UK agriculture in comparison to Ireland can be, if one prefers to think beyond the obvious, another advantage for Ireland's farming and rural sectors.

There are many market and resource-linked factors that can provide a positive outlook for Irish agriculture and rural Ireland. Exploiting them will however require a much greater degree of imagination when it comes to creating agri-food strategy than is being employed at present.

So where does this place the more immediate future for the Irish agri-food sector? It is about embarking upon the transition from being focused on 'premiumised' commodities to creating less-processed, simpler, natural food products. It was where agri-food policy was focusing ten years ago before it was hi-jacked by the volume-expansionist policies of Food Harvest 2020. This will be a slow process as the resources required to support the transition have been misdirected in recent years. In the meantime, it is about developing a twin-track agri-food strategy that recognizes that premiumisation of commodities is here to stay for a long while yet but that their production is not going to provide a sustainable future for the many smaller-scale Irish farmers who would actually rather like to remain within food production for the duration.

Creating the second track is imperative. It is that which will develop from the farm itself the food products that will be demanded by the issues-aware consumers of decades to come. Ireland is very well located to provide for this market. It also has a positive international image. It does not, however, yet have the products to supply the market and these products will not come through branding alone. They have to be created on farm and in rural communities. But first their future presence within the markets requires a seismic change in strategic thinking.

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