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| **RDS Committee of**  **Agriculture & Rural Affairs**  **Environmental Analysis of Food Wise 2025** |
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| The goal of the RDS Agriculture & Rural Affairs Foundation programme is to promote Climate-Smart Agriculture in Ireland. |
| August 28, 2015 |

## Putting Climate Smart Agriculture at the Centre of Food Wise 2025

Food Wise 2025 presents a 10-year vision for the Irish agri-food industry and should guide the future development of Ireland’s largest indigenous sector. However, it will be of little value as a guide unless it is accompanied by a well-developed strategy to deal with the challenges of climate change both to the sector as it exists today but also to the expansion envisaged under current plans. The EU and the UN have very demanding and ambitious targets and Ireland faces growing obligations to achieve 20%, 30% and eventually 50% reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in the coming decades. Due to the relatively large size of our mainly bovine based agricultural sector, agriculture accounts for approximately one third of Ireland’s total greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time Ireland is a low-emission food producer per unit of output, is a major food exporter and can contribute to meeting the increasing food demands of the growing world population. In framing Food Wise 2025, a significant opportunity to place *Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA)* at the centre of the development has been missed. The three pillars of CSA are

* Reducing agricultural emissions
* Adapting agriculture to the impacts of climate change and
* Enhancing food security and farm incomes.

In order to guide all those who will be investing in their farming systems, in their land use choices and in the food processing industry it is essential to develop the strategies for agricultural development and climate change in unison. Not to do so is unhelpful, and potentially misleading. Ignoring the environmental challenges at the planning stage will greatly increase the cost of compliance and remediation in the longer term and place Ireland’s clean green image at risk. One only has to look at the damage that has been done to the image of New Zealand dairying as a result of over-intensification and subsequent pollution of water sources in areas of that country.

There is little doubt that efficient dairying offers a unique prospect for agricultural expansion in Ireland. Dairying is 4 to 5 times more effective at producing high quality, high protein food than cattle or sheep farming. It consistently produces higher farm incomes and suits our grass based farming systems. Output was artificially constrained by the milk quota system for more than thirty years. At the same time suckler cow numbers grew as this was the only realistic option to increase or indeed maintain stock numbers for many farmers. With the ending of the milk quota regime dairy cow numbers can grow and suckler cow numbers can be allowed to reduce to something closer to their pre milk quota levels without necessarily reducing beef output. With technology such as sexed semen, dairy farms can contribute high quality animals to the beef herd without incurring the very high emission penalty of suckler cow beef. Food Wise 2025 should openly recognise this potential and integrate it into its projections.

Land use and land use change are critical to climate smart agriculture. The two key priorities are (a) mitigation of emissions through the adoption of cost effective technologies in all current farming systems and (b) releasing the land required to reach the target of 18% of the total land area in forestry. This planting target would need to be reached by 2030/ 2035 rather than 2050 and offset against the increased emissions from the dairy expansion envisaged in Food Wise 2025 if we are to have any hope of reaching the emission reduction targets for 2020 and 2030. Large areas of land are currently used for low intensity, low income drystock farming where cattle are finished at more than two years of age. These farms have not adopted the technologies necessary to farm more sustainably and many may never do so. A climate smart strategy must look at how this land can be put under the management control of well-trained younger farmers capable of adopting the technologies that will make such farming sustainable, in either efficient dairying or cattle production, or how it can be put under forestry. Forestry can contribute greatly to achieving a carbon balance. However, in order for the forestry option to contribute fully, increased plantings must take place immediately and at a much more rapid pace than current plans envisage. No consideration has been given to the potential for the domestic offsetting of increased emissions by farmers expanding in the dairy industry through involvement in forestry. This could increase the rate of forestry planting significantly.

Food Wise 2025 does not adequately address the most critical barrier to innovation and development at farm level – the continuing deterioration in the age structure of farmers and the lack of real incentives for many older farmers to cede control to younger farmers and thereby increase land mobility. Past incentives such as death duties, eligibility requirements of non-contributory old age pensions and income supports linked to output levels have ceased and can no longer act as an incentive to move out of active farming; indeed current policies act as an incentive to hold on to the control of land or let it under the 11 month system. The exceptions are the larger, more commercial farms where a successor has been identified within the family and where this successor is actively involved in the decision making on the farm. Current policies actively support this cohort of farmers very well but unfortunately they are in the minority.

Delivering growth through meeting the skills needs at producer level rightly receives much attention in Food Wise 2025. However, many of the recommendations/actions rely on the Teagasc education and advisory services for their effective implementation. The reality that the capacity of the advisory service has been reduced by two thirds, due largely to a bubble in retirements, has not been taken into account. The resources necessary to provide the service with the capacity to deliver the training and knowledge transfer programmes expected must be addressed in any implementation plan.

The RDS supports the proposition that Ireland can and should seek to expand and develop its agricultural and food resources where this can be done competitively and sustainably. As the impact of climate change and the availability of water for agricultural production further challenges production systems, especially in southern Europe, increased output from countries like Ireland will be necessary in order to balance the reduction in output in many other areas and to support the expected increase in the world’s population. Ireland has shown that it can produce milk and animal products with some of the lowest levels of carbon emissions per unit of output. These emissions can be further reduced through researching and applying mitigation strategies, very considerable progress is already being made in this regard. However, the adoption of mitigation strategies will be limited if those who control the land resources have limited interest or knowledge and if Teagasc lacks the resources necessary for education and knowledge transfer programmes. Land use/land use change is central to planning for a carbon neutral future. CAP payment, taxation and social welfare policies need to be reviewed in the context of promoting and enabling climate smart agriculture and utilising land that can be released from low output uneconomic farming systems for forestry. Maintaining water quality through the development and implementation of local water strategies under the Water Framework Directive and biodiversity are critical elements of land use plans.

## Strategic Environmental Assessment

Food Wise 2025 effectively ignores the agriculture expansion expected in the plan. Dairy cow numbers are likely to expand by up to 30% and this is not deemed relevant to the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and is therefore not assessed. The biggest acceleration of agricultural growth in thirty years is side stepped entirely in the Environmental Assessment Strategy.

In preparing any Strategic Environmental Assessment, a requirement is that it should normally involve comparison between alternative plans or programme scenarios. In Food Wise 2025 the Sustainable Growth Scenario is compared to the Base Case +Scenarioand not the Base Case scenario. Thus, the expansion of agricultural, fisheries, and forestry output is assumed to be already underway. This approach is inadequate as a guide to policy. Indeed, many will see it as a sleight-of-hand to obscure an important debate over the extent to which increased agricultural output can be achieved within the country's environmental boundaries and targets.

## Conclusion

The full consequences of the agricultural expansion envisaged in the next 10 years must be evaluated and planning targets set out to ensure that this continues to be sustainable. The programme of monitoring of the environmental performance of Food Wise 2025 must be seen to take place against a full documentation of the potential environmental consequences of the plan and the mitigation and offsetting measures proposed.