

## 4. FARMING LIFE WITH ITS ANIMALS AND BIRDS

There are proponents of ultra-processed alternatives to animal-derived food products. Whether they will be able to fulfil the complex nutritional needs of the human is open to debate. Likewise, their fossil-fuel-carbon and soil-carbon footprints. With textiles, the eco-friendly credentials of cotton and plastics-based fabrics will and are coming under the spotlight. It is unlikely that using animal-derived products will end anytime soon. In such a scenario comes the responsibility to ensure that farmed animals live as good a life as possible and that they meet their end in a stress-free environment. It is a moral obligation on Society.

There is a strong link between animal-welfare and biodiversity recovery. It comes via the use of *free-range* grazing of farm animals and poultry, albeit in specific ways. *Tall-grass / mob* grazing revolves around long recovery periods between the grazings of tall and diverse pastures. Such systems are needed to aid the recovery of soil microorganism [the foundations of farmland biodiversity's food chains]. *Tall-grass*, diverse pastures also provide habitat for flora and fauna and a healthy environment for free-ranging farm animals.

### IT IS ALSO ABOUT THE MARKETS

In the premium markets that should be of prime interest to a family-farming-sized industry, consumer awareness of animal welfare is higher than ever. Hence, operating to the highest standards is a necessity.

♣ *market mechanisms must exist to allow consumers to transmit their message to farmers, for farmers to respond with high-welfare animal-products in turn, and for the market to be able to pay a price commensurate with the additional costs incurred by those employing the higher welfare standards.*

This must not be '*left to the market*' and the Government must ensure that the market can work effectively and that functional, competitive supply-chains link the farmer to the animal-welfare-aware consumer.

### HIGH ANIMAL-WELFARE PRODUCTS

Animal welfare is a primary quality differentiator in food markets. *Free-range* is possibly the oldest way farming practice has been linked to the end product. Others have followed. Paying a premium-price in exchange for products produced to high animal-welfare standards is now widely accepted. Food markets are dynamic and products will continue to evolve and as consumer interest in animal farming rises, so will the demand for enhanced welfare products. An industry based on small-scale must be a market leader.

While Ireland has been quick to implement farm-assurance schemes, it has been slower in differentiating products according to the use of specific farming practices. It has been about commodities, not products. Route-to-market constraints have been a factor in this. Going forwards both these factors have to change.

♣ *Ireland must develop premium designated-origin products where differentiation is justified by the use of the best animal-welfare practice and supported by complete transparency and traceability.*

## GRAZING OR CONFINING FARM ANIMALS AND POULTRY?

Although certain, more extreme, forms of animal and bird confinement have become unacceptable, the demand for low-cost, low-priced meat has increased the actual numbers kept in confined conditions that bare absolutely no resemblance to the animal or bird's natural environment. Consequently:

- ♣ animals and birds are being raised without any opportunity to express natural behaviour
- ♣ they are all being reared on a totally artificial diet in unnatural, over-crowded conditions
- ♣ the systems' economics dictate that genetic selection focuses on unnatural growth rates

In addition, there are other questions to consider:

- ♣ the threat to human health-care's antibiotics from in-barn-developed drug resistances?
- ♣ do the feeds have any connection to the nutrient cycles of the feed-crops being grown?
- ♣ are the feeds being fed either imported or from local crops fed with imported fertilizer?
- ♣ do the animal wastes created make beneficial fertilizers or do they damage soil health?
- ♣ how significant are Confined Animal Feeding Operations' ammonia and GHG emissions?
- ♣ how great is the threat to water quality from their waste during storage and spreading?

Policy suggestions to move away from Confined Animal Feeding Operations include:

- ♣ *focus upon market segments characterized by the new 'eat less meat but better' slogan*
- ♣ *facilitate route-to-market initiatives that ensure consumers can suitably reward farmers*
- ♣ *support animal farming where all the feed is from on-farm/local forages and Irish grains*
- ♣ *recognize the climate-change need to close the farm-animal / feed-plant nutrient cycles*
- ♣ *move towards a situation whereby all farmed animals and birds have access to pastures*
- ♣ *recognize the decisive role grazing has in rebuilding soil health and sequestering carbon*

## THE PROBABLE END OF LIVE-EXPORT

The live export of farm animals for slaughter should not be happening. It is possible that it will be outlawed with respect of exports to third countries that do not have clear equivalence with EU welfare standards.

It is likely that long distance / duration movement within the EU will be constrained with, in particular, the longer-distance shipment [over land or water] of very young animals [usually calves] being totally banned.

Ireland is very involved in the export [in this case, all-Ireland movement is not considered to be an 'export'] of young calves and finished livestock. It must prepare for constraints to be imposed upon these activities.

The issue goes beyond animal-welfare lobbyists' demands, it concerns the premium-paying consumers which Irish farming must target if its family farms are to survive. Those consumers will not accept the existence of a 'parallel universe' whereby *Irish* produce is labelled *animal-welfare friendly* or *sustainably-produced* on the one hand while on the other the industry continues with its longer-distance live exports.

***In practical terms, the cattle and sheep sectors must plan for when exports are limited to pedigree stock only, albeit EU movement rules may allow Irish Sea shipments of other animals [of say cattle of greater than six-months of age] within strict time-frame limitations [assuming EU/UK standard equivalence].***

### ENDING LIVE EXPORTS ACTION PLAN

- ♣ establish a timeframe within which to end the live export of all but pedigree farm animals

### FARMING SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

- ♣ determine the extent to which technology can guarantee only calves-with-value are born
- ♣ reassess milk production in the context of reducing the seasonal veal-type dairy-calf glut
- ♣ examine the feasibility of Irish-based rose-veal farming and what is needed to catalyse it
- ♣ evaluate the potential for switching to the dairy breeds with dual-purpose characteristics
- ♣ reconsider beef farming in the context of producing premium-to-the-consumer products

### ROUTE TO MARKET DEVELOPMENT

- ♣ guarantee that beef farmers will have local, independent abattoir and processing options
- ♣ identify the likelihood for existing players to offer farmers new route-to-market services
- ♣ investigate the demand for and the feasibility of building route-to-market infrastructure
- ♣ research, analyse and identify what premium-paying beef-product markets actually want
- ♣ assess what help beef farmers need to change their systems to meet consumer demand
- ♣ encourage the establishment of producer groups around specific premium beef products

## LOCAL ABATTOIR GUARANTEED RIGHT OF ACCESS

The reason cited for the need to export live beef cattle is that the ownership of the beef factories in Ireland [thus the routes to market] is too polarized to provide the competition necessary to ensure *fair* prices are paid. With calves, it is a case of too many calves being better suited to veal rather than beef production.

A priority must be to remove the production of near-worthless calves on all dairy farms by:

- ♣ re-assessing the economics of dairying that produces higher-quality milk and beef calves
- ♣ switching to using dual-purpose cows and/or such breeds to avoid the poor-calf problem
- ♣ establishing a domestic rose-veal sector, albeit this may need more regular calf supplies

Greater route-to-market flexibility is needed to give beef farmers better access to consumers who demand quality-differentiated products. If local slaughter is specified as a premium-quality trait in its own right [as per some French premium-quality schemes], addressing this issue also has major animal-welfare benefits.

For animal-welfare and farm-income reasons, there must be access to local abattoirs by:

- ♣ legally specifying a maximum travelling distance and/or time to an abattoir
- ♣ guaranteeing that a farmer has a choice of at least three in-range abattoirs
- ♣ ensuring that all farmers have access to smaller service-providing abattoirs

Also, the Government should act to ensure that a network of small abattoirs can thrive by:

- ♣ ***declaring that abattoirs [and rendering facilities] provide a public service***
- ♣ *use public funds to grant support investments into a local abattoir network*
- ♣ *provide a publicly-funded food-safety inspection-service for small abattoirs*
- ♣ *likewise, for smaller-scale, localized meat-processing facilities and butchers*

Farmers must have access to abattoirs that provide a service that includes individual carcass traceability. This will allow consumers to use market signals to indicate their animal-welfare preferences to farmers.

Reducing animal stress in their last hours justifies public expenditure. This and improving the operation of the farm-to-fork supply-chains to better reward the farmer, is why ***public funding should now be focused more on the operation of the entire supply chains and not just on farming activities inside the farm gate.***

## FARMING WITH THE 'CALF AT HOOF'

The rise of the vegan-diet movement provides indicators of where the next animal-welfare 'fault-line' will appear. One of these will be the practice of very early cow-calf separation on dairy farms. This may not be a mainstream issue in the immediate future, but wisdom should dictate that the industry prepares for when it is, not least because changing to a calf-at-hoof system is not particularly straightforward. Hence:

- ♣ support farmers to develop dairy-farming systems where the calf is reared at hoof
- ♣ offer grant support to farmers who are converting to calf-at-hoof milk production
- ♣ help develop calf-at-hoof dairy produce, local processing and niche-market access
- ♣ create and facilitate the operation of routes-to-market for 'calf-at-hoof' products
- ♣ support the promotion of 'calf-at-hoof' beef products traceable to suckler rearing



## MALE / FEMALE LIFE EXPECTATIONS

Farming systems that render the newly born or hatched useless because of their gender will be a rising issue. The case of pure-bred bull calves from dairy cows was mentioned above with respect to their export for veal production elsewhere. In a worse-case scenario they have little to no value. This inevitably leads to welfare issues, albeit many farmers will still put welfare above economics. It is a choice that they should not be having to make. While the use of sexed semen to ensure that only pure-bred dairy heifers are born is one solution, *dairy system change should be encouraged to totally remove the worthless bull-calf issue.*

The issue is as great in egg production where male chicks of hybrid-laying breeds have no value. The issue is a time-bomb for the industry. There is the potential that this may be resolved with pre-incubation, sex-determining technology [as it can be at the pre-insemination stage with calves] but the same question should be asked, *are there opportunities to return to the use of dual-purpose breeds to resolve the issue?*

As with addressing most animal-welfare issues there is an on-farm cost to pay and, therefore, the need to access premium-paying markets with a specific product to offset the cost [and incentivize the producer].

## INCREASING ON-FARM LIFE SPANS

The life-span of many farm animals and birds has been in decline. This may be due to:

- ♣ targeting increased animal / bird growth rates to improve economic or GHG-emissions efficiency
- ♣ aiming to improve the genetics of breeding stock to supply fast-growing production young-stock
- ♣ seeking to benefit from breeding genetically more productive / efficient milk-producing animals
- ♣ greater health stress placed on stock by farming systems that are non-optimal for animal health

With respect to growth, are faster rates achieved to the detriment of flavour and, hence, contrary to the **'eat less but better'** ideal? If so, is using the wrong performance measure encouraging poorer-quality?

Further, are GHG-efficiency targets based on NET emissions? If regenerative grazing is able to produce carbon-neutral [or better] products and even attract carbon credits, slow food may win out over fast growth [which may also require imported grain]. If so, greater on-farm longevity may also be achievable.

In all systems there should be animal-health benefits if intensity is reduced by targeting the **'eat less but better'** idea. For too long it has been about producing more for less. **'Eat less but better'** is a watershed which, if accompanied by effective routes-to-market, should deliver for farmers and animals and birds.

### SLOW FOOD OFTEN MEANS A LONGER FARM-LIFE

- ♣ traditional breeds are usually better suited to slower-growing systems. Their heritage, a more varied diet, and the complex flavours associated with maturity may enhance the product's value.
- ♣ slow growth may be achieved on a 100% forages diet without supplemental feeding. The GHG saving in often imported grains and proteins may then outweigh those incurred by a longer life.
- ♣ Local, traditional breeds may also be more robust and need less animal health intervention [cost].

Some premium food products stipulate and/or allow a longer life. For example:

- ♣ the BŒUF DE CHAROLLES AOC requires suckler rearing and at least three grazing seasons on local hedgerow-lined, diverse pastures. Winter forage must be local hay. Heifers must be at least 28 months old at slaughter and steers 30 months. Cows for beef must be no more than 8 years old.
- ♣ the BAREGES-GAVARNIE AOC requires male sheep to be at least 18 months old and grazed for two summers in high Pyrenean mountain pastures. Ewes must be between two and six years old.
- ♣ the POULET DE BRESSE AOC stipulates that the chickens must be raised to at least 140 days old.
- ♣ the GALICIAN BLOND, an ever more renown beef, can be up to 17-18 years old when slaughtered.



## ANIMAL-HEALTH PRODUCT USAGE

It is widely accepted that the use of antimicrobial products has to be reduced in agriculture. With the rise of natural resistance to antibiotics, it is imperative that human health care is prioritized: Henceforth:

- ♣ an **antibiotic footprint** must be assessed and published for the animal-farming systems used
- ♣ consumers must be made aware of the antibiotic footprint of their meat / dairy / egg choice
- ♣ production system-changes must happen to avoid those reliant on routine antimicrobial use
- ♣ grant aid should be offered where simple system changes can remove antimicrobial reliance
- ♣ asset scrappage schemes may be considered when antimicrobial reliance cannot be avoided

Less known outside farming is the rise of natural resistance to animal-health products. It is especially so with anthelmintics [aka wormers] routinely used against internal parasites. It is a food-security concern.

Further, the prophylactic use of anthelmintics may be damaging soil microorganism and vital species like the dung beetles. They may be seriously impacting the food-supply chains of farmland biodiversity. Thus:

- ♣ farming-practice change must be a research priority to lower the reliance on anthelmintics
- ♣ some plants have anthelmintic properties [i.e. birdsfoot trefoil] and this should be explored
- ♣ the broad medicinal qualities of multi-species swards should be investigated and employed
- ♣ identifying and working with breeds more naturally resistant to parasites must be a priority

*Overall, farming must become focused upon **using species and breeds that are very simply more robust.***