

**Food Vision 2030 Event: A World Leader in
Sustainable Food Systems
13 October 2022**

Dia dhaoibh ar maidin a chairde.

Tá lúcháir orm a bheith in éineacht libh inniu i gCaisleán Bhaile Átha Cliath don imeacht seo agus ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an tAire Charlie McConalogue as cuireadh a thabhairt dom a bheith I, bhur dteannta anseo.

I am delighted to be here with you today in Dublin Castle at this important moment in the evolution of our national agri-food policy, and I would like to thank my colleague Minister Charlie McConalogue for inviting me to be a part of it.

In Ireland, agri-food is an absolutely integral part of our economy and society, and especially so for our rural and coastal communities. Beyond direct employment, the sector plays a key role in the wider rural economy.

Global demand for high quality food is increasing with growing population, urbanisation and affluence. The Irish agri-food sector, with its global reputation for quality and safety, has a large and enthusiastic market for its produce.

Ukraine and the Agri-food sector

However, in recent years we have seen significant disruption to the sector caused by the pandemic, Brexit, and most recently the brutal invasion of Ukraine.

Our people have shown great solidarity with Ukraine, and the Government also remains resolute in our support. We will continue to provide a humanitarian, economic and diplomatic response to a crisis that has been caused by Russian illegal and immoral aggression.

Significant implications are being felt across all sectors, including in agri-food. In addition to the immediate humanitarian crisis that faces the people of Ukraine, which must take priority, the EU also needs to take the necessary steps to ensure that food security is maintained, for EU citizens, for the Ukrainian people and in the wider global context.

We have seen disruptions in supply chains that our Agri Food sector is reliant upon. Supplies of fertilizer and animal feed that were sourced in Ukraine or Russia have been disrupted and prices have soared.

As a Government, we have responded through the introduction of a number of schemes and packages to assist farmers in meeting these escalating costs, which might persist for some time. We have also introduced schemes to encourage farmers to increase their area of tillage, so we can become more self-reliant when it comes to animal feed.

Budget 2023 introduced further measures to support the business community, including farmers, through this challenging time. Work is ongoing on a Ukraine Credit Guarantee Scheme that will be accessible to farmers, fishers and food businesses in meeting their liquidity and investment needs.

We also announced a new half a billion Euro ‘Growth and Sustainability Loan Scheme’ (GSLs) which will facilitate strategic investment by farmers, fishers and food businesses to ensure their continued viability and sustainability into the future.

General Agri Food overview

The resilience shown by our farmers and fishers over the past number of years, and indeed all those across the food distribution chain, including retail, shows that the agri-food sector can be agile and responsive and is open to embracing change when it is required.

Agri-food exports fell by just 2% in 2020 at the height of the pandemic, and rebounded quickly in 2021. In 2021, the sector employed 170,400 people, representing 7.1% of the entire national workforce.

The average Farm Income increased for the third year in a row in 2021 with dairy, sheep and tillage performing strongly. This is testament to the resilience and adaptability of our farmers. And the qualities must be harnessed now as never before for what is probably the greatest challenge facing Ireland the rest of the world – climate change.

Climate Change

It cannot have escaped any of our attention in recent months that the very real impacts of climate change are manifesting themselves more starkly across our planet.

This summer alone we have witnessed record temperatures, wildfires, calamitous floods, and prolonged droughts. The increasing frequency and severity of such events are further evidence, if such were needed, of the rapid destabilisation of climatic cycles that have sustained our civilisations for millennia.

The nature of the Climate challenge is unlike others that we have faced. It is far more complex and requires a fundamental rethinking of how we work, travel, use our land and source our energy.

Successfully addressing the challenge, sufficiently reducing our emissions and adapting to the climate change that is now unavoidable, requires a rethinking of the very fundamentals of how we have constructed our economies and societies over the past two centuries.

Our Programme for Government sets out a strong framework for climate action and places it at the heart of all our work. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 established in law our 2030 and 2050 targets and require us to set climate budgets and long terms strategies.

Following the process set out in the Act, a carbon budget programme until 2035 was approved by Government in February, and adopted by the Houses of the Oireachtas in April.

In July, we reached agreement on Sectoral Emissions Ceilings for the electricity, transport, buildings, industry and agriculture sectors. The Ceilings set maximum limits on greenhouse gas emissions for each of these sectors to the end of the decade to ensure they remain within the legally binding carbon budgets.

The emissions ceiling for agriculture has been set at a level requiring a 25% reduction in emissions over the period to 2030. Further work is ongoing to finalise a sectoral emissions ceiling for the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry sector, which, together with the completion of a land use review, will provide further clarity for the context in which the Irish agri-food sector will operate in the coming decades.

While openly acknowledging that achieving these targets will be challenging, the Carbon Budgets and Sectoral Emissions Ceilings are an essential framework to guide our efforts.

Agriculture has a central role in this effort by virtue of its share of Ireland's overall emissions. We are, in many ways, at a crossroads for the agri-food sector - our oldest and largest indigenous sector.

Our task now is to ensure its ongoing centrality in our national life and its long term success. To do so, we must honestly address the challenge that climate change poses for the sector, and together harness the massive opportunities that this changing context presents for farmers and our entire rural economy.

Irish agri-food can have a strong future. It can continue to produce world class food while improving its environmental credentials and lowering its emissions, thanks to a science-based approach that also improves biodiversity, and improves the quality of the water in our rivers, lakes and estuaries.

Food Vision

Food Vision 2030, launched last year, is an important element of this transition. It is a strategy for the sector produced by the sector. The approach to developing this strategy is important, as it provides space for frank discussion around the future of the sector. I welcome that today gives us another opportunity to continue these conversations.

Food Vision is honest about the challenges ahead. It proposes some solutions and seeks to chart a pathway to sustainability across all of the environmental, economic and social dimensions.

It uses a food systems approach, which involves considering the interconnectivity of food, in particular with the environment and with nutrition and health.

The Strategy is ambitious for primary producers, our farmers, fishers and foresters. It envisages an upward trend in Farm Income towards 2030.

We all want a greater percentage of viable and sustainable farms. This will include improved economic returns to land, an upward trend in primary output value with increased diversification across sectors.

And we must achieve this while significantly improving the sector's environmental performance, including through lowering the sector's emissions by a quarter over the remainder of the decade.

Implementation is already underway, and the most immediate priority in the context of climate is to determine the sustainable environmental footprint of the dairy and beef sectors.

I know that the Food Vision Dairy Group has published its interim report with plans to stabilise and reduce emissions within the dairy sector. The Food Vision Beef and Sheep Group has also been established. I warmly welcome this work.

Food Vision 2030 supports a vision of a sustainable future, but it is a starting point. Together, as a society, we must go further and faster in order to achieve our goals of a net-zero future by 2050.

I would like to conclude by echoing Food Vision 2030's ambition for Ireland's agri-food sector. For my part and as a Government we are determined that Ireland become a *'World Leader in Sustainable Food Systems'*.

Today you will hear from guest speakers and panellists and I hope that your discussions will be fruitful in exploring the exciting, progressive and sustainable future that lies at the heart of this important new policy.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.