

Autumn 2020

Volume 5, No. 3



NRN NEWS

connecting communities, growing our future

SPOTLIGHT

Aoife Forde is a suckler farmer from Clare who recently featured in the NRN Women in Agriculture Video Series. Four other farmers were involved, including Sinead Conry, a Pedigree breeder from Roscommon; Deirdre Divilly, a dairy farmer from Galway; Margaret Edgill, an organic farmer in Offaly; and Daphne Scott, a sheep farmer, who also owns and runs Precious Pets, in Cavan. (Source: Aoife Forde)



LEADER Programme Update

Activity in the LEADER programme has continued to increase as we move into the third quarter of 2020. As of the middle of September, there are over 3,300 LEADER projects approved, with a total value of over €130m. This is an increase of over 300 projects since the end of May and an increased spend of almost €8m in the same period. There are 372 additional projects, with a value of over €26m, working their way through the approval process.

Despite the impacts of COVID, the LEADER Programme has continued to progress thanks to the resilience of the different actors involved in delivering LEADER. To learn more about LEADER funding and how to apply see <https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/>.

NRN Welcomes New Ministers

The NRN works closely with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCDD) to maximise the outcomes of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (RDP). The NRN would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to the newly appointed Ministers across both Departments.

Charlie McConalogue, TD, has been appointed as the new Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. From a farming background, he was educated at Carndonagh Community School before going on to study Economics, Politics & History at UCD. It was at UCD he first became involved in politics. After working in Fianna Fail Headquarters for a number of years, as well as working abroad in Australia, he returned home to work on the family farm before officially running for political office in 2009, where he was elected as a Donegal County Councillor. In 2011, he was elected a TD for Donegal North East.

The NRN would also like to welcome Pippa Hackett TD, Minister of State for Agriculture with responsibility for Land Use and Biodiversity, and Martin Heydon, Minister of State with special responsibility for Research and Development, Farm Safety and New Market Development within DAFM.

The NRN would similarly like to extend a warm welcome to the new Minister for Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands, Heather Humphreys, TD. Minister Humphreys previously served as the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht since 2017. She is joined by Joe O'Brien, who will take up responsibility as the Minister of State for Community Development and Charities.

The NRN welcomes the new Ministers and it looks forward to working with them in the future to help drive rural and community development across Ireland.

New Video Series Documents Changing Role Of Women In Agriculture

The National Rural Network (NRN) recently launched its Women in Agriculture Video Series, which highlights the pivotal role women play in the Irish agricultural industry. The series features five women from the different sectors of Irish agriculture discussing their experience of farming in contemporary Ireland.

This series features Sinead Conry, a Pedigree Hereford breeder from Roscommon; Deirdre Divilly a dairy farmer from Galway, and University College Dublin (UCD) Agricultural Science student; Margaret Edgill an organic farmer from Offaly; Aoife Forde, a suckler farmer based in the Burren, County Clare; and finally, Daphne Scott a sheep farmer based in Co. Cavan, who also runs her own dog grooming, boarding kennels and mobile pet farm under the name Precious Pets.

Series participant Aoife Forde, from Carron in the heart of the Burren in Co. Clare, states that "Women are no longer seen as merely help on the farm but are now treated as

equals". Commenting on the historical trend of succession and inheritance of Irish farms, she says "the idea of simply passing the farm over to eldest son is starting to die out, which in my opinion is a good thing. A farm should be passed over to anyone who is really interested in it, rather than just a son for mere tradition's sake".

"These videos challenge traditional perceptions of women in Irish farming."

Commenting on the series, Dr Maura Farrell from the NRN and NUI Galway says, "These videos challenge traditional perceptions of women in Irish farming. The women in these videos are highly innovative, resilient and dedicated to farming, similar to many other women on farms across Ireland. Their expertise and commitment reinforces my belief, that a good farmer is a good farmer irrespective of gender".

The Women in Agriculture Video Series is available at www.nationalruralnetwork.ie

Irish NRN: Women in Agriculture Video Series



Source: NRN

LEADER Case Study: Blackcastle Farm



John Commins with his Piedmontese cattle (Source: Blackcastle Farm)

John and Ann Commins decided to try a new venture by breeding pedigree Piedmontese cattle to enhance the viability of their fourth generation family farm in Two Mile Borris, County Tipperary. Piedmontese cattle are native to the Piedmont region in the North-West of Italy and are snow-white in colour. Aside from this, the meat they produce is particularly unique in that it has only 1% fat, is high in protein and omega 3, and is flavourful. John and Ann sought LEADER funding to help to develop their own on-farm food processing unit to allow them to process their own premium Piedmontese beef products under their brand Blackcastle Farm to supply the Irish retail, restaurant and direct selling trade.

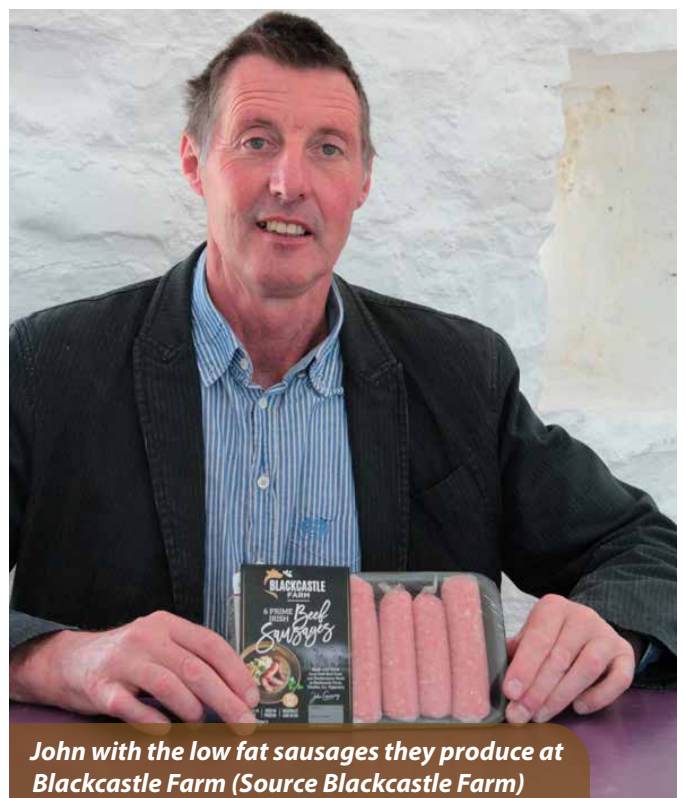
In 2005, John and Ann initially became interested in Piedmontese cattle after they learnt about the premium price the breed commanded in the Italian market place. To learn more they visited Italy and decided to take on the Piedmontese Breed at the home farm in Tipperary and export them back to Italy to capture these price premiums. However, they didn't have enough scale to make exporting to Italy cost effective and Irish reared Piedmontese cattle didn't hold as much value in the Italian market.

So, John and Ann then decided to try and promote the meat in Ireland. They did this to reasonable success by developing a partnership with a fellow Piedmontese breeder to establish 'Irish Piedmontese beef' however, market forces and the ending of the partnership arrangement, prompted John and Ann to do a total rebrand and to try and bring all aspects of the business back to their own farm, Blackcastle Farm.

"I think it appeals to people...when they...hear the whole package is here on farm...I think since COVID people have got a lot more appreciative of where their food is coming from..."

They had been renting a processing unit, however the travel time and ability to only process raw meats, led them to seek LEADER funding to develop their own on-farm processing unit. This new unit has both a raw and cooked meat kitchen which allows them to process a range of raw and cooked value added products such as pastramis and sausages. Only recently, Blackcastle Farm developed a 1% Low Fat Sausage for the Aldi GROW Programme.

LEADER funding also helped to develop visitor spaces and facilities which afforded further opportunities to expand the business and run food tours and workshops. To read the full case study on this project see <https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Blackcastle-Farm-LEADER-Case-Study-FINAL.pdf>.



John with the low fat sausages they produce at Blackcastle Farm (Source Blackcastle Farm)

A Year on with Alan Doyle, 2019 NRN Biodiversity Farmer of the Year



Alan Doyle, NRN Biodiversity Farmer of the Year (second from right) with (from left to right) Aoife Smith (NRN), James Claffey (NRN), Thomas Duffy (Macra President) and Freda Salley NRN (Source NRN)

We recently caught up with Alan Doyle, the 2019 NRN Biodiversity Farmer of the Year, on his farm at the foot of Mount Leinster, part of the Blackstairs Mountains. A drystock farmer, he farms on 86 hectares which includes 32 hectares of upland commonage land.

Alan is a champion of good environmental management and has demonstrated a sincere passion for farming methods that protect and enhance biodiversity. Since winning the award, Alan has focused on areas such as grazing management and soil fertility. He has also implemented a rotational grazing system on his lowland.



Alan on his farm in Co. Carlow (Source: NRN)

This system encourages the utilisation of grass and encourages better regrowth. Rotational grazing ensures that grasslands are given time to recover between grazing periods and improves the diversity of grasslands through a more even grazing pressure and suitable stocking rate.

Soil fertility is a key priority on the farm. Alan uses soil sample results to correctly plan the amount of nutrients required on his farm. He balances the different nutrients produced to ensure soil fertility is maintained at optimum levels to maximise output, while at the same time not affecting the environment. The main fertiliser used on the farm is organic manure collected from the housed animals over winter period. The incorporation of manure back into the soil helps to improve the soil structure, increases soil biodiversity and helps to prevent soil erosion.

On the upland area of the farm, maintaining a sustainable stocking rate through grazing management

is an important tool to maintain the mosaic of habitats present within the commonage. Maintaining fences and protecting archaeological sites are other important actions carried out by Alan.

Alan is an active member of the Blackstairs Farming Group (BFG) which has been accepted for the Blackstairs Farming Futures (BFF) Pilot Project funded through the Rural Development Programme EIP-AGRI scheme. The objective of the project is to adopt innovative approaches to add value to the Blackstairs hill-farming system whilst simultaneously improving habitat condition.

The winner of the 2020 NRN Biodiversity Farmer of the Year Award will be announced at the FDB Young Farmer of the Year Awards in November. See www.nationalruralnetwork.ie for information.

ALAN'S BIODIVERSITY FOCUS AREAS

"Seeing biodiversity on my farm and knowing that I am undertaking actions to help to promote it gives me a great sense of pride. I have many areas on my farm where biodiversity is thriving, such as along my dry stonewalls. I often see kestrels and pine martens on my farm," says Alan.

Dry Stone walls



Source: NRN

Low-Input Permanent Pasture



Source: NRN

Alan has low-input permanent pasture on his farm. These permanent pastures are extensively grazed and managed with low inputs, resulting in a diverse sward which sustains a greater variety of plants and wildlife. The maximum chemical nitrogen application allowable to low-input permanent pastures under the GLAS scheme is 40kg N/ha per annum. Pesticides are not permitted, except for spot treatment of noxious weeds and rushes.

Bird Boxes & Bat Boxes

Bird and bat boxes are a successful alternative to the more natural habitats. Several bird and bat species have come to rely on farm buildings and other structures for nesting and roosting locations. There are nine bat species found in Ireland, and they are all protected by the 1976 Wildlife Act, and 2000 Amendment, and the EU Habitats Directive.

Webinar Series Tackles Key Sustainability Challenges for Farmers



Source: NRN

The National Rural Network in association with Teagasc ConnectED, Dairy Sustainability Ireland and Food Drink Ireland Skillnet, is hosting a series of informative online webinars called the Sign Post Series. These free webinars are designed to help address the challenges Irish farmers face regarding sustainability, the environment and greenhouse gas emissions. The Sign Post Series is providing a platform which allows the latest research and policy to be shared with the wide variety of stakeholders within agriculture.

The webinars are hugely popular and provide a diverse range of sustainability-related information to participants, allowing them to reflect on how they can use and apply the knowledge to help address sustainability issues in the sector. The webinars are also interactive, allowing viewers to ask questions and participate in the discussion.

Throughout the series, participants have heard from a host of experts including from Teagasc, the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, the Environmental Protection Agency, Met Éireann, the Local Authority Waters Programme, Dairy Sustainability Ireland and Trinity College.

To date the webinars have focused on issues including reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Irish agriculture, feeding management for productive ruminants, water quality, nitrogen & phosphorus interactions with the soil and water, Ireland's changing climate, climate adaptation policy, carbon sequestration in grassland, energy efficiency and biodiversity on farmland.

John Muldowney, from the Department of Agriculture and the Marine (DAFM) said, "This webinar series has been a great collaboration between the National Rural Network, Teagasc, Food Drink Ireland Skillnet and Dairy Sustainability Ireland to help raise awareness of the sustainability challenges facing Irish agriculture. Furthermore, it has provided a stepwise

change in illustrating the potential of digital communication solutions to deliver farmer and wider industry information both live and as a library of information to be reviewed at one's own convenience."

Jack Nolan, also from DAFM, added that stopping the decline of, and improving, our water quality is particularly important. "While water quality in Ireland is relatively good compared to other EU Member States overall, there has been a net decline in water quality since 2015. Similarly, biodiversity trends are not positive. Simultaneously both livestock numbers and fertiliser use have increased. Reducing losses of nutrients to water has major co-benefits for biodiversity and air and will yield financial savings to farmers," said Jack.

To date, the Sign Post Series has addressed many of the challenges faced by the Irish farming cohort. Collaborations and cohesive thinking are key principles which will set the agricultural sector on the correct downward trajectory for emissions to meet our climate action targets and address water quality and environmental sustainability issues.

Appropriate land management can ensure that farm systems are balanced to provide a wide array of services from food production, environmental sustainability and economic return. Where soils are appropriately managed, these services can be provided in a sustainable manner, while ensuring land resources are not degraded."

Freda Salley from the National Rural Network said the webinars are stimulating discussion among stakeholders in the industry on how Irish agriculture is addressing sustainability and environmental issues.

See www.nationalruralnetwork.ie for a full schedule of topics covered and visit our YouTube channel to watch the previous webinars: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGoPgiMPMZoRGSHgREzYWwyw>

Smart Rural Project is Gathering Momentum

The 'Smart Rural' project is a new two and a half-year venture, coordinated by the E40 Group and supported by the European Commission (DG AGRI), with the overall aim of promoting smart village approaches and strategies across Europe and inspiring villages/rural towns to develop and implement them. 21 rural communities from throughout the EU have now been selected, from a total of 736 applications, to receive guidance and technical support through the project. Dingle in Co. Kerry has been chosen as the Irish representative in this exciting initiative. More information about Dingle and the Smart Rural 21 project can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3f0eD0Q>



The Smart Rural Project concept is closely aligned to the EU Action for Smart Villages initiative, launched by the European Commission in 2017. Ireland's position in relation to the development of Smart Villages (and Smart Rural Towns in an Irish context) is that they can be greatly enhanced through the successful delivery and modernization of the LEADER Programme. Over the past 29 years, LEADER, through its community-led approach to rural development in Ireland and the across the EU, has proved

its value and endurance in supporting rural dwellers and communities in realising their potential, and overcoming the assortment of challenges they face. Rural development strategies and projects such as the Smart Villages initiative are considered to be most effective and efficient when decided and implemented at a local level by local actors, hence the appropriateness of building on LEADER's 'bottom up' framework in supporting the economic and social development of local areas.

National Rural Network participate in Digital Communications Workshop

On 16th June 2020, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) hosted a Digital Communications workshop, which was held online. The workshop brought together representatives of the National Rural Network support units (NSUs) dealing with rural development communication tasks to exchange ideas on and improve digital communication activities.

As part of the one-day workshop, James Claffey, Project Manager of the National Rural Network, outlined how the NRN's communication strategy has adapted due to the pandemic. James outlined how the NRN converted its public meetings into webinars where around 300 agricultural stakeholders attended weekly. The initial four-week programme of events was extended due to

its success and high attendance. James also highlighted the National Rural Network's Women in Agriculture video series and the children's colouring competition as key communication tools in disseminating information and ensuring the NRN meets targets in the absence of physical events.

Professionals Dimitri Houtart from the UK's BBC Rural Affairs team, Ian McCafferty from DG AGRI Communications and journalist/producer Brian Maguire provided participants with useful tips and advice on how to maximize digital communication tools to reach bigger audiences with targeted information. To read the full workshop report please visit: www.enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/ws_digital-communication_highlights-report_v2.pdf

New EIP-AGRI Video Blog Series Launched by the NRN



The first episode in this exciting new series features Colm and Martin Gavin from Co. Mayo, who are involved in the €10 million Pearl Mussel Project. They explain how this results-based, locally led agri-environmental project is working on the ground to improve the quality of watercourses for the benefit of the endangered freshwater pearl mussel, and also how it is making a difference at farm level by rewarding farmers for their environmental services, whilst having the freedom and flexibility to farm. You can view the video here: <https://youtu.be/0CBt4Mp8VTs>.

This good practice dissemination platform is just one of a number of multi-method communication strategies being implemented by the NRN to maximize the success of the objectives set out in the RDP 2014-2020.

What is the NRN?

The NRN is a membership network for farmers, agricultural advisors, rural communities and others interested in rural development. It provides up-to-date information, case studies, seminars and conferences to maximise the beneficial outcomes of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 for rural stakeholders. The NRN is managed by a consortium led by Irish Rural Link in partnership with The Wheel, NUI Galway and Philip Farrelly & Co. The NRN aims to:

- increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
- improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes;
- foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.
- The NRN is focusing on specific themed areas over the coming years:
- BIODIVERSITY
- CLIMATE CHANGE
- EU LIFE
- EIP-AGRI
- LEADER
- VIABILITY AND COMPETITIVENESS OF FARMING COMMUNITIES

For more information visit www.nationalruralnetwork.ie

Join the NRN

Are you interested in rural development?

Join the National Rural Network (NRN) by signing up on our website www.nationalruralnetwork.ie

Once you have joined, you will receive monthly email updates on the RDP, the LEADER initiative, case studies and more.

For regular updates follow us on:



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Ireland's EU Structural and
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