

Climate Change

Young Farmer from Co. Laois making Soil Health a Priority



Photo Caption: Tomas with his herd of Dexter's in a grass clover sward

The NRN recently met with young farmer Tomas Moore from Abbeyleix, Co. Laois. Tomas farms a mix of dry stock breeds such as the rare breed Dexter, and a mix of Hereford, Angus, Friesian cross cattle alongside the tillage enterprise. Completing his green cert in June 2021, Tomas began the process to becoming an Organic farmer by applying to the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) this year (2022).

The OFS is an agri-environment measure under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's (DAFM) Rural Development Programme (RDP). Farmers entering the scheme could qualify for yearly payments of up to €220 per hectare during the conversion period and up to €170 per hectare when they have achieved full organic status.

"I have visited a number of similar farms who are farming organically, I love the idea of farming and making a living out of what the land can sustain itself. Ireland has targets to meet around organics, there is an incentive with the OFS scheme that will make the conversion easier. I believe the measures I have incorporated will ensure my farm is viable and sustainable into the future".

Ireland currently has 87,000ha under organic production or in conversion. The government have a target of increasing Irelands Organic area under "Food Vision 2030" to 7.5% of the total agricultural area of 350,000ha.

Tomas was successful in his application to the pilot Soil Sampling Programme initiative in 2021 which provided a comprehensive oversight to the soil health and condition on his farm. This information is vital for knowing the health status of the soil which is an important driver to ensure the success of the transition to organic.

Tomas is farming forty acres, of which 5 acres is in organic oats, 5 acres in multi species sward (MSS) and the remaining 30 acres is in grassland. The aim is to build an organic system that is sustainable and low cost. Tomas intends to use the home-grown organic oats to feed cattle during the winter months. Once the oats are harvested, a catch crop is sown and established. During the main grazing season, all livestock are rotated between the grass clover swards and MSS. During the late autumn/winter period livestock are fed silage and strip grazed on the catch crop to minimise concentrate

feed usage. All slurry produced on farm is applied by a contractor to the silage ground using Low Emission Slurry Spreading (LESS) equipment, to ensure the most efficient uptake of nutrients.

Purchased feed and fertilisers are expensive inputs on conventional farms, converting to organic farming, means no chemical inputs are used and alternative measures to enhance soil health are essential such as:

- Testing soil and spreading lime in accordance with test results. Soils with sub-optimal pH may not perform as well and grass production affected.
- Clover in swards, to avail of its nitrogen fixation ability.
- MSS, includes a variety of forage grasses, herbs and legumes in the animal's diet, this helps prevent sickness and poor thrive.
- Using LESS technology to spread slurry.

The diversity of species within the MSS sward contributes to nitrogen fixing and sequestering carbon deeper into the soil with deeper rooting structures which also helps performance in drought conditions.

“The health of a soil affects its ability to maintain a supply of available nutrients for crop uptake. Knowing where I stand from a soil health and fertility perspective, I can be confident that my farm will grow more than enough grass to meet demands of the livestock. I can't rely on chemical inputs to do the job so it's essential the clovers and other herbs and legumes provide for the soil.”



Photo Caption: Mixed drystock herd grazing catch crops

The NRN would like to thank Tomas for assisting with this interview and wishes him luck in his conversion into organics.