



# NOT SO GREEN:

# DEBUNKING THE MYTHS AROUND IRISH AGRICULTURE

## Summary

This briefing document, compiled by members of the Environmental Pillar and Stop Climate Chaos, draws on extensive policy and scientific evidence to challenge government and industry claims regarding the sustainability of Irish agriculture, in terms of its efficiency, its contribution to global food security, and efforts on climate mitigation. The document also highlights inadequacies in the Irish Government's approach to LULUCF (Land use, land use change and forestry), and challenges the argument that afforestation presents a viable option to offset emissions from agriculture. Members of Stop Climate Chaos and the Environmental Pillar are available to assist policy makers and industry members to identify measures and initiatives to help make the transition to a more sustainable future.

*Food Harvest 2020* and *Food Wise 2025* have become official policy for the Irish Government, despite being compiled by industry and lobby representatives with very little input from the Oireachtas (Ireland's parliament) or civil society. This policy is further supported by Bord Bia (the Irish Food Board) through a national and international marketing campaign entitled *Origin Green*, which seeks to brand Irish agri-food products as being produced in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner.

Overall, Irish agriculture in its current form, is damaging to climate, water quality and biodiversity. The ongoing intensification and expansion of Irish livestock agriculture is the greatest threat to Ireland achieving compliance with its climate and energy responsibilities, and its environmental obligations including legal compliance with EU Directives – the Water Framework Directive, the Habitats Directive, and the Birds Directive. Forestry is not, and cannot be a substitute for reducing fossil fuel and agricultural emissions.

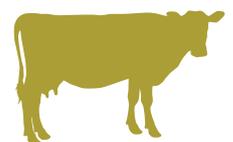
### ***Irish agriculture is not efficient***

- Ireland's cattle-based agriculture is *less* efficient than the European average, in terms of the level of greenhouse gases emitted per calorie of bovine food produced.
- Methane produced per head of cattle has increased in Ireland since 1990. Contrary to assertions from Teagasc (the national agriculture and food development authority) and the Irish Government, improving 'efficiency' alone is not climate mitigation unless total sectoral emissions fall. In fact, emissions are increasing. Emissions reductions can now only be achieved through a substantial reduction in total cattle numbers (from the current number of approximately seven million) over the next two decades, and/or a reduction in yield.
- Despite concerns about carbon leakage (i.e., production moving elsewhere), there is no support from industry members for a carbon tax on beef and dairy products that would actually recognise efficiency savings, or prevent leakage to cut emissions.

### ***Irish agriculture is not contributing to global food security***

- On a net calorie basis, Ireland's food exports feed 1.4 million fewer people than Ireland's food imports, undercutting any suggestion that Ireland is helping to "feed the world". Feeding grain to cattle undermines global food security by removing calories and land from the global food supply.
- Climate change has significant implications for global security, particularly to agricultural production in developing countries. By failing to curb emissions from the agri-food sector in Ireland, the Irish government is, in fact, contributing to climate injustice by amplifying the risks to food security elsewhere.

**METHANE PRODUCED PER HEAD OF CATTLE HAS INCREASED IN IRELAND SINCE 1990.**



This document is a summary of the briefing paper 'Not So Green: Debunking the Myths around Irish Agriculture'. The full briefing paper, with references, is available at: [www.stopclimatechaos.ie/download/pdf/not\\_so\\_green.pdf](http://www.stopclimatechaos.ie/download/pdf/not_so_green.pdf)

- Efforts to address global food security should focus on the real issue of supporting the majority of the world's farmers, who are small scale producers engaged in subsistence agriculture, who for example produce 70 per cent of Africa's food supply. These farmers can double their food production within ten years by using genuinely environmentally friendly and socially just agro-ecological approaches.
- Animal foods of all kinds are extremely inefficient in producing protein. Per calorie, or per kilogram of greenhouse gases produced, or per hectare, animal protein is far less efficient than plant-based protein.
- Significantly more plant-based food calories and protein can be produced on far less land than that which is devoted to beef, dairy, and sheep production.

**Intensive agriculture is the greatest threat to water quality in Ireland**

- Eutrophication of rivers and lakes due to phosphorous losses from agriculture continues to be the most critical impact of Irish agriculture on water quality. More than 70 per cent of phosphates reaching inland waters emanates from agricultural sources. The percentage number of high status river sites under the Water Framework Directive almost halved between 1987 and 2012. The evidence is clear that, on average, river sites with high quality water are not associated with intensive agriculture in the surrounding area.

**Intensive agriculture and afforestation are significant pressures & threats to Ireland's biodiversity**

- Ireland's 2013 Article 17 report (a requirement of the *Habitats Directive*) on national high level pressures/threats to designated habitats and species in Ireland ranks forestry as the second greatest conservation issue after agriculture.
- Agricultural intensification has caused significant negative impacts on Irish biodiversity. One third of Irish wild bees are under threat of extinction; loss of natural and semi-natural habitat in the Irish landscape is a key factor. Ten of the 37 birds on the *Red List Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland* are farmland birds, including Yellowhammer, Curlew, and Barn Owl. Annex 1 species of the Birds Directive, which are associated with farmland and upland habitats, have also declined, including Corncrake, Hen Harrier, Red Grouse, and Golden Plover.
- Over 90 per cent of Ireland's internationally important habitats have 'bad' or 'inadequate' status, including semi-natural grasslands, blanket bog, wet and dry heath, and fens. These are all habitat types which are at risk of agricultural intensification or afforestation.



Monoculture forestry has negative implications for biodiversity.

**Afforestation is not a credible climate mitigation measure**

- Government and industry claim that the high level, and projected increase, of emissions from livestock can be off-set by an increase in afforestation. This argument is scientifically flawed because the off-set available is only a small fraction of potential fossil fuel emissions. Also, as detailed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, such land sequestration is impermanent (relative to the thousands of years of mitigation required), highly uncertain, and subject to carbon cycle rebound effects that seriously reduce their value. Widespread afforestation also presents significant threats to Ireland's biodiversity, where planted forest replaces more diverse habitats.

**Current policy approaches selectively choose carbon sinks**

- Although forestry and soils are regarded by the Irish government as viable land-use options for offsetting agricultural emissions, wetlands and peatlands are not. The failure by government to include peatlands is likely explained by the fact that our peatlands are currently being used unsustainably for the industrial scale extraction of peat for burning and horticultural purposes. This extraction and associated drainage creates large emissions, making peatlands, which were once a net sink, now a major emission source. Peatlands are still Ireland's largest terrestrial carbon reservoir. Purposely selecting one land-use sink to offset emissions, while continuing to actively destroy a much greater reservoir and a former sink (i.e. Ireland's peatlands), is unjustifiable.



**One third of Irish wild bees are under threat of extinction.**



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