

Opening Statement by Oisín Coghlan,
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for the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine

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Chair, Members of the Committee, the Stop Climate Chaos coalition is grateful for this opportunity to contribute to this important session on Climate Change. Our coalition of overseas aid, environmental, youth and faith groups has been working together since 2007 for Ireland to do its fair share to tackle the causes and consequences of climate change.

The changing climate poses a threat to all of us in Ireland, to all parts of the country and society, and to all sectors of the economy.

Agriculture is not exempt from these climate risks and threats. In fact, agriculture is particularly dependent on a stable climate. In recent years we have seen this in the damage done by flooding and the fodder crisis. And in recent days by the damage done by the combination of Storm Emma and the “Beast from the East”.

All these kinds of extreme weather events are made more likely by global warming. Our greenhouse gas emissions are “loading the dice” against ourselves and our futures.

Research carried out for the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition in NUI Maynooth a few years ago found that climate change could cause economic losses to the agricultural sector of between €1 to €2 billion a year by mid century if we fail to reduce our emissions now.

Just as it is not exempt from climate risks, the agricultural sector is not exempt from climate responsibility.

As you know Ireland’s track record on climate action is not good. We are one of only a handful of EU countries that are going miss the 2020 targets we agreed to, and the only one where emissions are still rising. Our emissions are the eighth highest per person in the rich world, and in the 2018 Climate Change Performance Index Ireland was ranked worst of all EU member states. The Taoiseach recently told the European Parliament that Ireland is a laggard on climate action and that he wasn’t proud of our record.

Both the EPA and the Climate Change Advisory Council have used the word “transformation” to describe the scale of the change we need to see in our society and our economy to do our share to prevent runaway climate change. Transformation in how we generate electricity, heat our homes, plan our cities, towns and rural areas, in how we move from a to b, and yes also how we produce and consume food.

Nobody is asking the agriculture to do more than its fair share. But we are asking agriculture to do its fair share.

In fact, the National Policy Position on Climate Action, adopted by Government in 2014, and underpinned by the Climate Action Act 2015, accords special and differential treatment to the agricultural sector.

In line with EU policy and climate laws in other countries such as the UK and Finland, the National Position stipulates an 80% reduction in emissions from electricity generation, buildings and transport, but only carbon neutrality in agriculture and land use. That is to say that by 2050 all our annual emissions from agriculture have to be offset by enhancements to our treecover, our peatlands and grasslands in such a way that sucks carbon pollution from the air and locks it in for the long-term.

Our analysis of Teagasc figures suggests that the best performance we can expect from such carbon sinks is that they lock in about 9 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent each year, up from around 4 million tonnes now. In this best-case scenario therefore we will still have to reduce annual emissions from agriculture by about 10 million tonnes from around 19 million tonnes in 2016 to 9 million tonnes in 2050 to match the maximum carbon capture capacity of our natural sinks.

This will require a 2% reduction in agricultural emissions every year from now to 2050. That compares, however, with the 5% year-on-year reductions required in the rest of the economy and society.

These are the clear implications of the Government's own freely adopted National Policy Position, not some "externally imposed" EU target.

Unfortunately, however, neither the rhetoric nor the action of ministers or industry stakeholders is in line with the National Policy Position.

In this decade, nobody expected agricultural emissions to fall as fast or as far as emissions in other sectors, but what is alarming is the plan to drive agricultural emissions in the other direction. The government strategy for agri-business is for ongoing expansion of beef and dairy production. And already we are seeing the impact on pollution. Emissions have *risen* by an average of 2% a year the last two years, when they need to be *falling* by 2% a year to even begin moving towards carbon neutrality.

The Government will no doubt note that the National Policy Position states Ireland will take "an approach to carbon neutrality ... which does not compromise capacity for sustainable food production".

This language is something of a fudge. I was there when it was made by Phil Hogan and Simon Coveney to get the climate change Bill over the line. Indeed the Climate Advisory Council has now asked the Government to elaborate and define its approach. That is a timely request.

There are a couple of things we can say about it right now, however. We either start taking the measures to achieve carbon neutrality in the agricultural sector or we don't. We can't define our way out of the challenge. Ireland's "approach to carbon neutrality" cannot simply be not to achieve it. And if fail to reduce agricultural emissions in line with Government policy, then we have to reduce emissions in other sectors even more than the 80% target we have already set. There is no escaping the imperative to take action commensurate with the threat of climate change and our commitments under the Paris Agreement.

The other variable here is “capacity for sustainable food production”. This is something that Stop Climate Chaos member organizations such as Trocaire, Concern and Christian Aid have considerable experience of, working as they do across the world with people struggling to achieve sustainable food production. My colleague, Noreen from Trócaire, will address this in her statement.

But one thing I can say right now is that “sustainable food production” does not mean what some representatives of Irish agri-business think. It does not mean ever-increasing exports of beef and dairy products from Ireland.

Nobody in Africa, or Asia or Latin America will go hungry tonight for want of Irish agricultural exports. Indeed, even in our own country over the last week when retail supply chains were put under considerable strain, it was bread not meat that became the subject of our half-in-jest, whole-in-earnest online humour.

Irish agricultural exports, notwithstanding their quality and value, do not contribute to sustainable food production and global food security. They are, as Simon Coveney put it when he was Minister for Agriculture, “premium products for premium markets”. It is the rising middle class in emerging economies that we see as our growth markets, not the hungry in Africa.

So let’s not kid ourselves by telling ourselves that we are feeding the world. Because we’re not kidding anyone else. Our agricultural sector has the same responsibility to act to reduce emissions as the German car industry or the Polish energy sector. The timeline and targets may vary in the short-to-medium term but moral and legal obligation to reduce emissions under the Paris Agreement and the EU response does not. And we risk our reputation as a modern forward-looking country with our current approach of marketing spin to cover-up business-as-usual.

We want to see a vibrant and diverse economy in rural Ireland, sustaining flourishing communities. But betting the future of rural Ireland on *ever-increasing* production of beef and dairy is a big gamble. And it’s not sustainable, economically, socially, or environmentally.

In fact, the transition to a “low carbon, climate-resilient, environmentally sustainable” future, as the Climate Act puts it, has many opportunities for rural Ireland in everything from tourism to energy. As Joseph Curtin of the IIEA, and lead author of their Climate Smart Agriculture report, put it in his presentation to the Citizens’ Assembly: ambitious climate action can happen in such a way that benefits rural communities, and in a manner that drives regionally dispersed economic development.

That’s the future we need to work together to achieve.