

## **IGFA response to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stage Consultation on Ireland's Draft Nitrates Action programme September 2021**

IGFA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stage Consultation on Ireland's Draft Nitrates Action programme. IGFA supports measures that help improve water and air quality and protect biodiversity. We strongly believe that this can be achieved in combination with increased farm productivity and sustainability.

We note the various measures proposed in the consultation and have commented below on those most relevant to the Irish feed sector.

### **General points**

- Record keeping – we agree with the call for accurate and streamlined record keeping outlined in section 4.4.3 of the document. Keeping the administration burden to a minimum for farmers and their advisers and suppliers is vital to increase efficiencies. Information provided on what records are necessary should be comprehensive and clear. It should also be clear for farmers and the feed companies that supply them, what supporting documentation might be necessary during nitrates inspections.
- Training - We support cohesive training across the sector to support better implementation and buy in, from stakeholders as outlined in section 4.4.4. In the recently published IGFA Sustainability Action Plan we included 'Expanding our Expertise' as one of the 5 key themes. Although our members already engage in continuing professional development, we recognise that there could be advantages to having a more consistent programme in place for feed advisers especially on environmental matters. We have therefore committed to work with our membership to assess the training options available and work to develop a route to more consistent and extensive continuing professional development within the Irish feed industry.
- Nutrient management planning – the document notes that a number of submissions from the first stage consultation commented that nutrient management planning is not being implemented in many cases. IGFA believe that this is a vital first step towards any improvement. Nutrient management planning is essential to optimise the use of nutrients and identify where leakage might occur. The foundation of good nutrient management planning is accurate record keeping, making it even more important that these existing systems are streamlined and used more effectively.

In addition, the document notes that the first consultation stage 'highlighted the unsustainable current practices related to manure movement, and the limited controls in place'. Proper implementation of nutrient management planning will help address issues associated with exports of livestock manure.

- Air Quality – we believe much can be achieved by encouraging the use of technology that already exists or is close to market. Examples include:
  - Rumen modifying additives in ruminant feed that reduce methane output whilst maintaining milk or meat productivity. These are close to market and facilitate increasing output whilst keeping a lid on enteric

ammonia emissions. They will add significant cost to feed prices and supports for their adoption should be considered.

- Protected urea fertilizers which have already been proven by Teagasc to reduce ammonia emissions.
- Those farming in nitrate derogation areas were required in 2021 to feed crude protein at a maximum of 15% from April 1<sup>st</sup> to September 15<sup>th</sup>. The start of the derogation period coincided with changeable weather and variable grazing conditions. In some areas grass was not available in sufficient quantities to supply protein requirements. The potential consequences of lowering protein levels in feed were therefore a concern for IGFA members and our farming customers. To avoid this problem in the future we would like DAFM to consider changing the period where maximum levels of crude protein are required to April 15<sup>th</sup> to September 30<sup>th</sup>.

## **Proposed non-GAP measures**

### Chemical Fertiliser Register

We note that DAFM is already working on legislation to provide for the development of a register of chemical fertiliser sales across the country. IGFA believes that the development of this register should be done in close collaboration with industry and that industry should be consulted at each step in its development. The administration burden associated with using the register should be limited to the greatest extent possible and information should be easy to record and maintain on the register.

The value of a Fertiliser Register is determined by the accuracy of the information collected. We understand the plans are for Co-ops to record chemical fertiliser sales against individual farmer's herd numbers but would like clarification on how information from other fertiliser suppliers will be recorded, training plans for staff to ensure consistency and how cross border trade will be dealt with.

The fertiliser register is a tool to track sales across the country but by itself will not impact N levels. We would welcome a better understanding of how the information gathered will be used to drive change.

### Improving compliance

The document says that 'the level of compliance with the requirements of the GAP regulations ...is generally considered to be low' and that there is the view that 'reform of the overall enforcement of the GAP regulations is required'.

There have been numerous measures undertaken at various times over the years to deal with nitrate issues and comply with the legislation. Many of these have caused heated debates with farmers and other stakeholders. IGFA therefore believes that full enforcement of the current measures to improve compliance should be the top priority. Generating improvements in water quality by improving compliance with the tools that are already available could deliver significant results and mitigate the necessity to implement new measures.

The consultation asks for observations on how enforcement could be improved. We believe that better education is key to achieving the requirements of the legislation and that relationships between farmers and those at a local level tasked with enforcement is critical. These relationships will not be improved by the introduction of hardline measures and instant penalties, which will only provoke anxiety. Given that local authority personnel are the face-to-face contact on the ground and often the only ones in a position to be able to explain to farmers the nature of the breaches, their recommendations should be sought on how to deal with individual breaches. Support from national government to improve compliance by working with local personnel to find solutions is likely to be a more effective and less costly way forward.

This consultation includes proposals on slurry and soiled water storage and management. One of the best ways to improve compliance would be to ensure that sufficient grant aid funding is available and accessible for costly measures such as slurry storage, slurry store covers and soiled water storage.

## **Proposed new GAP regulation measures**

### Slurry Storage and Management

The consultation proposes that all slurry must be applied by 15<sup>th</sup> September for 2023 onwards. We believe that the transfer of organic manures from livestock to tillage land should be encouraged and that this deadline is impractical. At present the Government policy is to promote a circular economy and slurry is a valuable resource that should be used as priority. The Government also wishes to promote the growing of indigenous proteins (beans). The deadline is not in line with either of these ambitions and policy objectives. In most cases winter and spring beans may not be harvested by September 15<sup>th</sup>. In addition, tillage farmers may not have spring cereal crops harvested by this time and will not have time to spread slurry on stubble and incorporate it on this ground. Furthermore, many planting dates and integrated pest management strategies involve farmers planting varieties as late as October.

IGFA therefore believes that the 15<sup>th</sup> September deadline for slurry application on tillage ground needs to be reviewed in light of the practical scenarios at farm level. A deadline of 30<sup>th</sup> September would be more workable and allow for late harvest or poor ground conditions that we sometimes see at the end of August and early September.

### Livestock excretion rates

#### ***Concerns with the banding system***

The banding system as proposed has raised concern amongst IGFA members for a number of reasons.

- It penalises the most efficient milk producers and high performing dairy farms that are driving the industry forward.
- Cows with higher milk output produce higher levels of organic nitrogen as a result of consumption levels but we would like to see further assessment of levels of organic nitrogen per kilogram of output in comparison to lower producing cows.
- Some herds are efficiently managed in an environmentally conscious manner, while others are very inefficient in terms of their nitrogen use. However, there is no differentiation between efficient and inefficient herds within the proposed bands.
- We believe the proposed banding system lacks consideration for the quality of the protein fed to the cow. Herds with higher milk yields are fed better balanced diets resulting in less N loss through urea and faeces. Requiring those who invest more in improving and balancing animal diets to be subject to higher excretion factors does little to reward or encourage efficiency.
- We are concerned about the placement of the bands. Under the proposed system 70% of the milk produced will fall into the middle band and a cow producing 6500kg milk is treated the same as a cow producing 12000kg. We are conscious that the aim is to keep the banding system simple, but it would be very useful to be able to compare the system proposed to other banding options.
- We are also concerned that those on the cusp of the band might consider it beneficial to reduce their milk production in order to avoid falling into the higher band. This would result in a self-imposed quota and would be detrimental to productivity. Welfare issues should be avoided at all costs and farmers near the threshold should not be persuaded by legislation to under-feed animals to reduce milk volumes.
- The banding system does not sufficiently make allowances for farm management systems that might help limit runoff and leaching into watercourses.
- The national herd size is constantly referenced as a concern in relation to climate change. The Teagasc 2027 dairy roadmap (published December 2020) estimates that by 2027 there could be 17,000 dairy farms in Ireland with a national herd size of 1.65 million dairy cows and an estimated milk supply of 9.5 billion litres (average milk produced per cow 5757 litres/cow). However, if all of the milk was to be produced by cows in Band 1 (4500 kgs milk ~ 4370 Litres), the cow numbers would increase to 2.17 million to produce the 9.5 billion litres projected for 2027.

We therefore see numerous drawbacks with blanket measures such as this banding system and are most concerned about the lack of incentive it delivers to those farmers who are not only more productive, but are exercising best practice and management on their farms. While our members will continue to cooperate with the authorities and our customers to promote best practice, we believe the banding system, as presently framed, will not deliver improved water quality.

### ***Measures for further consideration***

We are aware that the European Commission has a preference to move towards allocating excretion factors based on milk yields and that banding is adopted in a number of other EU members states. We strongly believe that if this is the direction of travel, the limitations of the banding system should be acknowledged from the start and measures built into any new system to tackle them. This could be achieved if it was agreed that the lines of the bands could be 'flexible' when there is evidence of other good practice measures being taken on farm. It would prevent a cliff edge or jumping between the bands and would provide an incentive to improve N management on farm.

We think consideration should be given to a farm specific calculation dependant on kgs of concentrate fed, crude protein content of concentrate fed, milk yield per cow and milk protein percentage. All of this information is readily available through milk processors and feed suppliers and would be a huge step in promoting N efficiency on farms.

Other variables/performance indicators to take into consideration could include for example

- Using innovative nutrition technologies.
- Using milk urea N levels collected by processors to indicate where excess protein is being fed and where efficiencies can be gained.
- Using Kilograms of milk solids per cow or even kilograms of milk solids per hectare to gage efficiency.
- Increasing efficiency through improved EBI.
- Milk Recording for dairy farms in derogation areas as a tool to help identify poor performing cows within the herd that have a high level of nitrogen output relative to their annual milk production.
- Using a 3-year rolling average milk yield to help smooth out the movement between bands.

Earned recognition for farmers could be used to support and promote best practice and encourage new technology to improve nutrient efficiency. By utilising modern on farm data collection systems it should be possible to develop an earned recognition system that is measurable, transparent and incentivises balanced production methods.

We understand that the aim is to keep any new system simple to operate, but if we genuinely want to see a reduction in nitrate levels, the banding system on its own will do little to achieve this.

### ***Timing***

It is of the utmost importance that proper time is given to allow farmers to adjust to new livestock nitrogen excretion rates. Under this proposal they may be required to reduce cow numbers, change genetics in order to maintain or increase cow numbers or increase their land base. Such structural changes could have significant impacts on the farm business and a fair transition period is vital to allow time to plan for these changes.

A phased introduction of the bands in 2023/2024 will allow a comprehensive review of various assimilations of what the banding will actually deliver for Irish agriculture. This time could be used to better understand and assess how the proposed banding will improving water quality and reduce GHG emissions under climate action and any detrimental impacts on farm productivity. We would welcome stakeholder participation in this work and IGFA professional nutritionists are committed to making their expertise available to support it.

### **Sewage/ Industrial sludges**

Local authorities do not keep these registers up to date or make them available to the feed industry. It is also impossible to see if checks have been performed by the local council, how much was used by the farmer and if they used a registered contractor. This lack of transparency and traceability means the feed industry cannot properly risk asses the grain so does not permit the use of municipal sludge on tillage farms.

### **Green cover on tillage ground**

While we would agree with the current practice of allowing stubbles to regenerate, we would disagree with the mandatory requirement for shallow cultivation 7 days post-harvest. We believe that the time frame is not practical as

there are often delays harvesting straw and removing straw off the fields, ground conditions may not be suitable and driver and machine availability will be stretched at that time.

Crops such as oilseed rape tend to naturally generate a green cover quickly from shed seeds without any intervention. Cultivation may not be necessary at all if a cover crop is established pre- or post-harvest either by broadcasting (pre or post-harvest) or direct drilling (post-harvest).

As all types of cultivation increases the rate of soil carbon oxidation, it should be kept to a minimum. The effective establishment of a cover crop will enhance nutrient cycling, improve soil biology and help build soil carbon levels. Whilst it may not be practical to establish cover crops on all of a farm's tillage area, having a target of 50% of the area may deliver significant benefits.

#### Review of technical tables

Up to date, scientifically sound data must be used through the programme if we are to ensure buy-in from farmers and stakeholders. Decisions made, particularly those that require changes on the ground must be evidence based and stand up to scrutiny.

#### **Contact Details**

Irish Grain and Feed Association (IGFA)  
Maeve Whyte, IGFA Director General  
Email: [maeve.whyte@eorna.ie](mailto:maeve.whyte@eorna.ie)  
Phone 086 862 9074