

Climate Action Plan 2023 – Changing Ireland for the Better

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IGFA Summary

Policy context

Under the programme for Government published in October 2020 and the Climate Action Act signed in July 2021, Ireland has committed to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) by no later than 2050 and to a 51% reduction in GHGs by 2030, relative to 2018 levels.

The first Climate Action Plan was agreed in 2019 detailing how to achieve these goals and this new Climate Action Plan 2023, is the first prepared under the new Climate Action Act. It updates the 2019 Action Plan in light of the introduction in 2022 of sectoral emissions ceilings agreed for all sectors of the Irish economy. The ceilings set maximum limits on GHGs for each sector. The ceiling agreed on 28 July 2022 for Agriculture has been set at a 25% reduction by 2030 relative to 2018 levels.

Key points

The agriculture chapter (pages 213-225) of the Climate Action Plan 2023 makes the following observations

- The agriculture sector is the largest contributor to Ireland's GHG emissions. This is unusual but reflects the economic, and historical, importance of agriculture, relative to other industries in the Irish economy.
- What sets Ireland apart from our EU counterparts is the scale of our beef and dairy sectors relative to our population.
- Overall emissions in agriculture have grown 19% over the last decade.
- The overall increase in agricultural emissions can be related almost entirely to the removal of milk quotas, which has led to an expansion in the dairy sector.
- Progress in breeding and feeding strategies has meant that the average kilogramme of milk is produced with a lower carbon footprint. However, this improvement in emissions intensity is being offset by a higher volume of milk produced by larger herds. Therefore, efficiency gains are outstripped by growth in dairy.
- With the increased cost of chemical fertiliser in 2022, it is expected that emissions in the sector will fall slightly due to the decline in chemical nitrogen sales. The challenge is to ensure this becomes the long-term trend.
- The impact of actions from within this sector have profound effects on other sectors e.g. feedstock to be grown for biomethane from this sector, although generating an alternate income and diversification opportunity in agriculture, will provide for reductions in the transport and industry sectors as fossil fuels are displaced.
- Emissions reduction in agriculture is particularly challenging because it is a biological system. There will always be residual emissions associated with food production. Some time is needed to develop the technological and innovative solutions, and also to determine whether the measures are having the desired impact.

Priority policies to reduce agriculture GHGs emissions

The document outlines the themes, targets and measures needed to deliver abatement in agriculture in the coming years. This includes those recommended by DAFM's Food Vision 2030 document (August 2021). A summary is below;

Changing how we fertilise our land

- Reduce chemical N use to a maximum 300,000 tonnes by 2030. It was 399,000 tonnes in 2021 but this is likely to have been curtailed as a result of the Russian war in Ukraine.

- Introduce a national fertiliser database
- Increase the adoption of protected urea – target 90-100% uptake of protected urea on grassland farms by 2030.
- Continue to fund LESS to contribute to nitrogen reductions and increase uptake by farmers to 90%.
- Provide support for the Protein Aid Scheme to support the production of legumes, which play an important role in fixing nitrogen from the atmosphere, resulting in reduced chemical nitrogen fertiliser usage.
- DAFM to fund establishment of multispecies and clover swards to reduce N dependence.
- Review maximum nitrogen limits as set out in Nitrates Legislation by Q2 2024, which is separate to reviewing conditions for granting of derogation status.

Expanding Our Organic Sector

- Provide financial support for conversion to organic farming. Target up to 450,000 ha of organics by 2030.

Improved efficiencies

- Continue current trajectory of earlier finishing. Target 24-25 months average finishing age by 2025 and 22-23 months by 2030. Currently it is 26 months.
- Promote improved animal breeding through focusing on low-methane traits.

Improved animal feeding

- Provide data and analysis to farmers on the benefits of improved animal feeding through knowledge transfer.
- Continue to work with all stakeholders to develop a slow-release bolus pasture-based feed additive.
- Improve how farmers feed their animals by reducing the crude protein content of their feed.
- Develop a methane-reducing slurry additive.

Mobilise land diversification options for livestock farms - Tillage

- ‘Increasing the volume of home-grown proteins and cereals to support our livestock sector is a key objective’
- Target up to 360,000ha of tillage by 2025 and 400,000ha by 2030. In 2022 there were approximately 348,500 hectares of tillage crops (cereals, legumes, beet, maize, oilseed rape, and potatoes). This increase in 2022 was supported by a tillage incentive scheme.
- Opportunity to increase the volume of Irish grain being used in the high-value drinks industry, and as a source of protein for the livestock industry.
- Over the next decade, there is the potential to produce 40,000 hectares of beans which would provide a native source of proteins.

Mobilise land diversification options for livestock farms - Expanding Our Domestic Biomethane Industry

- Target is for the production of up to 1 TWh of biomethane by 2025 and 5.7 TWh by 2030. This is triple the target of the last Climate Action Plan.
- Target to construct up to 20 Anaerobic Digestion plants of scale by 2025 and 200 by 2030.
- The biomethane would be made from biological feedstocks including food waste and agricultural feedstocks such as animal manures, grass and grass silage.
- Start-up of the Teagasc biomethane anaerobic digestion pilot plant in Grange
- Continue support for European Innovation Partnership pilot projects.
- Deliver a National Biomethane Strategy within 6 months, co-led by DAFM and DECC, under the auspices of Heat and Build Environment Delivery Task Force.
- Seek financial opportunities for capital support for the development of a biomethane industry in Ireland.
- Identify and address the research and knowledge gaps around supply of feedstocks, the role of digestate and the sequestration potential regarding biomethane production.
- Introduce obligation in the heat sector, incentivising the production of indigenously-produced biomethane.
- Seek financial opportunities for capital support for the development of a biomethane industry in Ireland.