



IRISH CATTLE AND SHEEP FARMERS' ASSOCIATION



ICSA Submission on the
Suckler TAMS Scheme

June 2013

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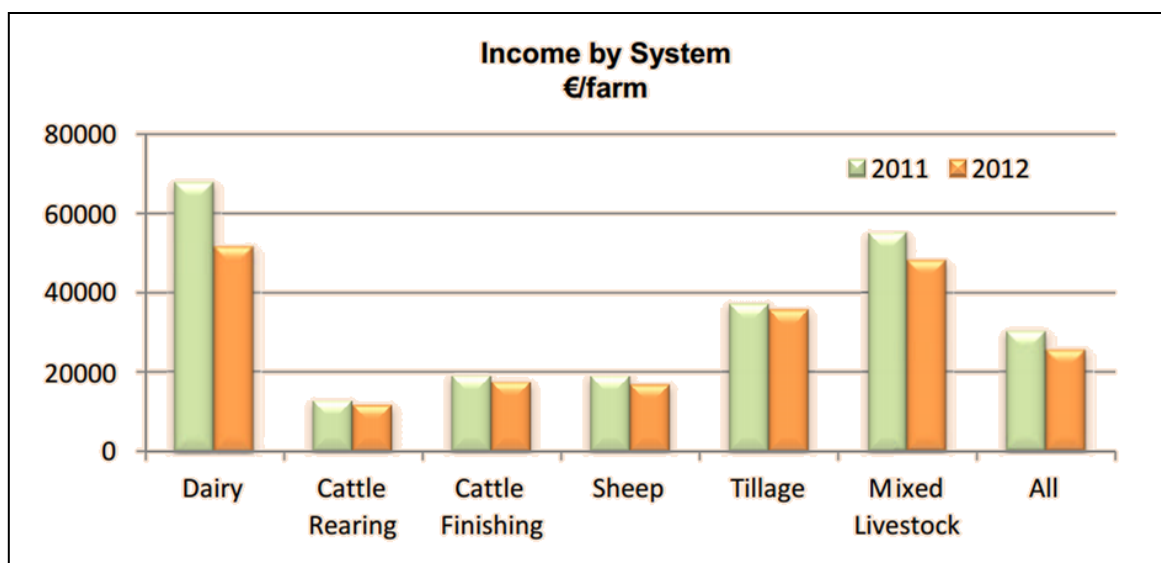
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ICSA welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in relation to the development of a new suckler cow-oriented Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme.

The suckler sector is the most labour-intensive and low margin farming sector in the country. ICSA refer to the Teagasc National Farm Survey (Figure 1) which show that huge discrepancies exist in terms of Family Farm Income and per hectare profitability, and that suckler enterprises generate the lowest income of any sector. The highest margin sector has to date been well supported by modernisation funding (i.e. the Dairy Hygiene Programme), and the sheep sector has been recently boosted by the Sheep Handling and Fencing TAM Scheme.



*Figure 1: Family Farm Income (€) by Enterprise
(from 2012 Teagasc National Farm Survey, Preliminary Estimates)*

Given the ongoing pressures upon the suckler sector, targeted funding is to be welcomed, assuming it can deliver some or all the following objectives:

- Reduction in labour input
- Improvements in farm safety
- Better welfare standards
- Measurable reductions in costs
- More efficient usage of resources
- Integration with the Beef Data Programme or subsequent Suckler Improvement Schemes
- Reasonable levels of co-funding for investment
- Increased output and profitability

Following internal consultation within ICSA, a consensus has been reached that the most appropriate use of funding for a Suckler TAM Scheme would be to prioritise improving farm safety and welfare through modernised animal handling facilities. High-quality static handling equipment that is appropriately installed will deliver more years of service than machinery-based investments, and will deliver measureable financial savings and significant

improvements to farmer safety and animal welfare. Installation and proper use of such facilities can form a core part of the training and information exchange which occurs as part of BTAP or subsequent discussion group programmes for the suckler sector. Better handling facilities, weighing equipment and remote monitoring technology all have the potential to improve farm efficiency, which is desirable in increasing much-needed profitability on suckler farms.

Suckler TAMS measures

It is proposed that capital grants be prioritised for the following categories:

Farm Safety & Welfare Standards

- Cow handling infrastructure
- Calving cameras

Animal Health & Genetic Improvement

- Livestock weighing equipment
- Badger-excluding water and feed troughs for TB-prone regions

It is also proposed that due to the low margins of suckler enterprises that the grant aid co-funding rate would be set at 40%. The above categories are expanded upon below.

Farm safety & welfare standards

It has come to the attention of the ICSA through consultation with its membership that there is increasing concern regarding the safety aspects of handling livestock. HSA data shows that 18% of farm fatalities in Ireland in 2012 were reported as being as a result of loss of control of an animal.

Suckler cows can be more unpredictable during stressful periods such as calving and weaning. These animals, which are handled less frequently, are known pose a greater risk to people than dairy cows. Cows are very protective of their calves, and several farmers have been killed in recent years by cows during or immediately after calving.

The HSA state that “*well designed and maintained handling facilities are essential for the safe handling of cattle and prevention of injury to handlers*”. Many accidents involving cattle could easily be eliminated with better handling facilities. It is clear therefore, that even a small degree of investment into handling facilities can deliver significant benefits from the perspective of working with unpredictable and powerful animals. Additionally, disturbance to calving cows can be minimised through the use of calving cameras. There is obviously a wide range of suppliers and diversity of handling infrastructure; ICSA have proposed some examples of some basic equipment below.

- Crush equipment with optional head scoop for safer inspection and dosing of animals
- Smaller dedicated crates for calf dehorning
- Crush extensions for increased safety at rear animal

- Mobile crush units for use in field situations
- Wired or wireless cameras for installation in calving sheds

Examples of the above options are depicted in Appendix 1.

Animal health & genetic improvement

Modernisation of suckler enterprises can also deliver benefits in relation to improving individual animal health and therefore cumulative benefits to the overall health of the herd. Through the installation of weighing equipment, several aspects of animal health & genetic improvement can be addressed:

- A regular weighing regime of calves would facilitate a farmer in identifying their most productive cows (i.e. those with the highest quality milk). Cows which suckle calves that gain weight at a better rate than others can be retained within the herd. Ongoing observation allows the overall herd productivity to be increased over sequential generations. This in turn can feed into improving the overall breeding index of the national herd.
- Regular weighing of calves can also contribute to the early identification of an animal's failure to thrive. This then facilitates timely dietary or veterinary intervention which can prevent unnecessary losses to the herd.
- From an economic standpoint, weighing equipment would allow a farmer to maximise their return on weanlings, by only selecting animals for sale at marts that have reached a target weight (e.g. 350kg).

Bovine TB is a problem on many Irish cattle farms. While badger culling is a valid means to reduce the overall level of TB exposure, and is supported by ICSEA, there are supplementary measures which could be applied via TAMS to further reduce badger-cattle interaction, particularly in TB hotspots. Studies by DEFRA UK have indicated that badgers regularly access cattle feed and water troughs, which has the potential to increase TB exposure risk. DEFRA biosecurity recommendations include: where possible avoid feeding concentrates on the ground and try not to over-feed supplementary food and regularly clean water troughs or make use of tipping systems. These recommendations could be readily applied in an Irish context via TAMS funding for specific equipment:

- Badger-excluding feed troughs – These feature rolling bars and minimal footholds which contribute to preventing badgers scavenging cattle feed and potentially contaminating it with TB.
- Tipping water trough systems – These facilitate more rapid flushing and cleaning of water troughs which have the potential to be accessed by badgers.

Examples of the above options are depicted in Appendix 1.

Conclusion

ICSA notes the significant potential that a well thought-out and implemented Suckler TAMS has for ensuring the competitiveness of the sector, improving health and genetic resources of the national herd, while sustainably managing natural resources.

ICSA believes that the proposals presented in this document can significantly contribute to the protection and improvement of the Irish suckler herd. ICSA wishes to state its expectation that any measures developed for a Suckler TAMS can be expanded upon and included in the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme, which will involve significant ongoing consultation and interaction with all relevant stakeholders.



Crush equipment with optional head scoop for safer inspection and dosing of animals (www.iae.co.uk)



Smaller dedicated crates for calf dehorning (www.iae.co.uk)



Crush extensions for increased safety at rear animal (www.iae.co.uk)



Mobile crush units for use in field situations (www.iae.co.uk)



Wired or wireless cameras for installation in calving sheds (<http://www.dswcctv.co.uk>)



Badger-excluding feed trough (www.iae.co.uk)



Tipping water trough system (www.iae.co.uk)