

## Section 0

# Organic Dairy Farming

by Dan Clavin



### Introduction

With ca. 50 operators, organic dairying is a small but growing sector within the Irish dairy industry. Organic dairying can be a profitable option but success depends on securing a good market price for milk. Important issues include grassland management, winter feeding, housing and cow health. There is good demand, particularly for winter produced organic milk.

- ① What is Organic Milk Production?
- ② What are the Key Things to Consider when Converting to Organic Production?

# Organic Dairy Farming

## ① What is Organic Milk Production?

Organic production is defined as

*“an overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes”.*

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### Is organic dairy farming profitable?

Organic dairy farming can be a profitable system of farming. This is clearly in evidence at Teagasc/DAFM organic demonstration farm walks which show financial margins well in excess of conventional benchmark targets commonly being exceeded by the top organic operators. On the other hand, evidence shows that on a financial return per hectare basis, organic dairy farming is less competitive than conventional.

Maintaining high output levels, coupled with lower production costs and premium market prices contribute to higher margins on organic farms.

#### Where are organic dairy farmers located?

Organic dairy farmers are extensively located around Ireland. There are about 50 organic operators in the country and they are involved in both Winter and Spring milk production. Over one-third of organic dairy farms are located in counties Cork, Limerick and Tipperary.

#### What stocking rate is allowed?

There is a stocking limit of 170kg N/ha. Organic farming is being practiced successfully in Ireland at stocking rates up to this level. Average stocking rate is 1.4 L.U. /ha.

#### Where can I supply my organic milk?

Presently, the main demand is for liquid milk for fresh milk and yogurts but there is also a growing demand for milk to manufacture cheese and other products. There are five main companies handling most of the organic milk. See useful contacts section for their details.

#### What market price premiums are available?

Premium prices are available for organic milk compared to conventional milk with relatively larger premiums available for Winter milk. Contracts are available from some of the processors. In recent years up to 2018, winter milk price has been 55-60c/litre for 5 months. Summer milk price has ranged from 30 to 44 c/litre.

#### What breed types are most suitable?

High yielding Friesian and Holstein animals at the expense of quality beef calves for meat production versus cross breeding and using lower yielding robust cows that require less feeding is the most obvious decision.

#### How do I apply to become an organic farmer?

You must apply for an organic licence. This is done by making an application to one of the Organic Certification Bodies (OCBs) and paying an annual fee. You must apply for an annual licence each year, allow for necessary inspections and keep organic records.

#### How long does it take to convert my farm and cows to organic status?

Before produce can be sold as organic from a farm, the farm must undergo an “organic conversion period”. Grass based farms go through a 24 month conversion period on the land during which time it must be managed to full organic standards but milk cannot be supplied to an organic market. The cows must be managed to full organic health and welfare/housing standards and fed to full organic standards (100% feed from organic sources) for at least the last six months of conversion. Note: from the conversion start date, all feed must be GMO free.

#### Are there rules regarding the housing and bedding of animals?

More space is generally required over conventional standards. In organic farming, animals must have access to a bedded area. A 100% slatted area is not permitted. Cubicles are also permitted but they must have dry bedded material on top of the cubicle. Rubber mats alone on cubicle beds are not a substitute for bedding. Straw (conventional is permitted), sawdust (un-treated) and woodchips for bedding of animals are permitted as bedding material.



### Can I dose or treat animals under organic rules?

Animal health is an extremely important part of organic principles. An animal health plan is prepared by your veterinary surgeon and submitted as part of the conversion plan prior to conversion. In essence, animals are treated if a treatment is required but under more formal arrangements. Withdrawal periods may have to be doubled or trebled under organic standards for all chemically synthesised veterinary medicines.

### What do I do if I have mastitis problems?

If preventative measures are not working adequately, antibiotics can be used in clinical cases where no other treatments would be effective. Two courses of antibiotics within 12 months are permitted, otherwise the cow is removed from the milking herd.

### Can I buy in non-organic replacements into my organic dairy herd?

On conversion, permission may be sought to source replacement heifers from non-organic farms up to a maximum of 10% of the herd size or in special circumstances, up to 40% of the herd size eg. in the latter case, a major expansion of herd size, breed change or new livestock specialisation. Therefore, prior to conversion, prospective organic dairy farmers are advised to source appropriate breeds of livestock that are required for breeding purposes on their organic holding.

### My heifers are normally reared by another farmer. Is this possible in organic farming?

Once organic stock leave your farm and go to a non-organic holding, they lose their organic status. Once you have converted to organic production and in order to maintain the organic status of your replacements, you need to rear your own replacements or get them reared on another organic farm.

### Can I buy a bull from a non-organic farm and is artificial insemination (AI) permitted?

Organic farmers are permitted to buy a bull from a non-organic farm for breeding purposes. Use of artificial insemination (AI) is also permitted. Sexed semen is permitted once the semen is not chemically separated.

### What scheme and grant-aid are available?

There are three separate organic schemes administered by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

#### A) Organic Farming Scheme (OFS)

This is an area based payment scheme. As of mid-2018 the scheme is presently closed. The scheme opened last in two separate tranches during 2015. Please consult with DAFM about scheme opening period and terms and conditions.

#### B) Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme - Organic Capital Investment Scheme (OCIS)

Forty percent (40%) grant-aid available for new specialised farm based equipment, new farm buildings or adaption of existing buildings. Full details and T&C: <http://www.agriculture.gov.ie>

#### C) Organic Processing Scheme

Forty percent (40%) grant-aid available for facilities for the processing, preparation, grading, packing and storage of organic products. Full details and T&C: <http://www.agriculture.gov.ie>

### What fertiliser if any can I use?

Good clover swards (especially white clover for grazing and red clover for quality silage), and targeted use of lime, farmyard manure and slurry mean that coping without chemical fertiliser can effectively be managed. Soil fertility inputs that are commonly imported onto organic farms include:

- Lime
- Cattle slurry from another grassland based farmer (either organic or conventional farmer; derogation farm source >170 kg N/ha is also permitted)
- Organic and or free range chicken manure
- Dairy sludge from approved dairy processing plant and;
- Certain mineral sources of fertilisers eg. Sulphate and Potash and Ground Rock Phosphate etc.

Note: organic manures from factory farms including commercial pig and non-organic or non-free range chicken farms are not permitted.

# Organic Dairy Farming

## How do I control weeds in my grassland?

As all herbicides are prohibited in organic farming, weed control must be achieved by management practices and mechanical methods. Grassland farmers achieve control of grassland weeds by maintenance of good levels of soil fertility and appropriate soil pH, regular topping, and rotation of silage and grazing ground. A dense, well managed sward will minimise infestation since seedling weeds are poor competitors to grass-clover swards.

## What dry matter yields can be expected?

Advances in the development of new white clover ley mixes mean that dry matter (DM) yields of up to 10-12 tonnes DM/ha can be achieved from the highest quality grass-white clover swards. Modern high yielding red clover mixes for silage can produce annual yields of 13 to 15 tonnes DM/ha. In older swards, a yield of 6-8 tonnes DM/ha is more normal. Clover is the main driver of productivity on organic grassland farms.

## Will I be able to get two cuts of silage?

Grass production may be lower on an organic farm and first cut grass-white clover silage making may be a week or two later than usual. One cut is normal for on organic grassland situation, except for red clover based swards where two or even four cuts are normal with careful management and favourable conditions.

## Is bloat an issue on organic farms?

White clover may contribute over 40% of the DM (dry matter) in the sward from August onwards. While bloat is not normally a problem on organic farms (for cattle are accustomed to grazing clover pastures), be cautious about the risk of bloat especially later in the grazing season and use preventative measures to minimise bloat risk. Some preventative measures are as follows:

- For animals not accustomed to clover, feed them to fill with hay/straw immediately before putting them onto a clover-rich pasture.
- Move at-risk cattle to a high clover pasture when the herbage is dry rather than wet.
- Adding pluronic agents to drinking water may be allowed. Consult with your relevant Organic Certification Body (OCB).

## How much does organic concentrate feed cost and where can I source it?

Prices for organic concentrate feed generally costs around €500 per tonne, with straight cereals and combi-crops mixes (a grain and a pulse eg. wheat and pea) costing €300 - €400 per tonne and straight pulses costing ~€500/tonne. Maximising use of home grown grains, pulses and or combi-crops and purchasing straights or combi-crops from other organic farmers can help to reduce feed costs. Organic feed is fairly widely available from both local co-ops and the U.K. Contact details of where to buy organic feed may be found on the organic certification body (OCB) websites.

## How do I know if I am prepared to become an organic farmer?

A good farmer will always be a good farmer irrespective of the enterprise carried out. The skills required can be picked up from your adviser, attending an organic training course, attending Teagasc/DAFM organic demonstration farm walks and talking to and visiting other organic farmers.

See [www.teagasc.ie/organics](http://www.teagasc.ie/organics) for details on available training courses.







## Key Point Checklist



### 2 What are the Key Things to Consider when Converting to Organic Production?

- Get acquainted with the adjustments required by attending farm walks, talking to other organic farmers and or contacting a local advisor.
- Research market opportunities. Contact relevant processors to explore market requirements, specifications and what times of the year milk is required. Some organic farmers choose to sell directly which requires extra work to develop your own market.
- Choose an Organic Certification Body (OCB) and get an information pack.
- Prepare a conversion plan and submit to OCB.
- All entrants to the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) must enter for an initial five year plus term. Please consult DAFM website: [www.agriculture.gov.ie](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie) for updates on a new Organic Farming Scheme.
- A 25 hour 'Introduction to Organic Production' course has to be completed by all new applicants before acceptance into the Organic Farming Scheme.

### Useful Contacts

#### Organic Milk Processors:

##### Glenisk

Contact: Brian Cleary, Farm Relations Director  
Tel: 087 7436004. E-mail: [brian@glenisk.com](mailto:brian@glenisk.com)

##### Aurivo

Contact: Anthony Walsh, Farm Services Manager  
Tel: 094 9860143. E-mail: [newmilk@aurivo.ie](mailto:newmilk@aurivo.ie)

##### Arrabawn

Contact: Cormac Sinnott, Commercial Manager  
Tel: 090 9686400. E-mail: [csinnott@arrabawn.ie](mailto:csinnott@arrabawn.ie)

##### The Little Milk Company

Contact: John Liston.  
Tel: 087 9471632

Conor Mulhall, CEO

Tel: 058 68555

E-mail: [conor@thelittlemilkcompany.ie](mailto:conor@thelittlemilkcompany.ie)

#### The Village Dairy

Contact: Noel Barcoe, General Manager  
E-mail: [noel@villagedairy.ie](mailto:noel@villagedairy.ie)

Kenny Hurley, Production Manager

E-mail: [kenny@villagedairy.ie](mailto:kenny@villagedairy.ie)

Tel: 059 9143437

#### Teagasc:

Dan Clavin, Organic Specialist, Teagasc, Athenry, Co. Galway

E-mail: [dan.clavin@teagasc.ie](mailto:dan.clavin@teagasc.ie)

Elaine Leavy, Organic Specialist, Teagasc, Grange, Co. Meath

E-mail: [elaine.leavy@teagasc.ie](mailto:elaine.leavy@teagasc.ie)

#### Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine:

DAFM Organic Unit, Johnstown Castle, Wexford, Co. Wexford

Tel: (053) 91 63400

Web: [www.agriculture.gov.ie](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie)

E-mail: [organic@agriculture.gov.ie](mailto:organic@agriculture.gov.ie)

#### Organic Certification Bodies:

##### IOA (Irish Organic Association)

13 Inish Carraig, Golden Island, Athlone

Tel: (090) 64 33680

Web: [www.iofga.org](http://www.iofga.org)

##### Organic Trust

2 Vernon Avenue, Clontarf, Dublin 3

Tel: (01) 853 0271

Web: [www.organictrust.ie](http://www.organictrust.ie)

##### Global Trust Certificate Ltd.

3rd floor, Block 3, Quayside Business Park, Mill Street,  
Dundalk, Co Louth

Tel: (042) 93 20912. Fax: (042) 93 8686

Email: [info@gtcert.com](mailto:info@gtcert.com)

##### BDA Certification - Organic and Demeter

The Painswick Inn Project, Gloucester, Gloucestershire, GLS  
1QS, United Kingdom

Tel: (0044) 145 376 6296

Fax: (0044) 145 375 950



