

Closing address by incoming INHFA President Vincent Roddy to the organisations 2021 National AGM

As President of the Irish Natura & Hill Farmers Association I want to thank Minister McConalogue for his attendance today and we look forward to further engagement with you on CAP and the many other farming issues that no doubt will feature in the coming months and years.

While it's often been said that this is a critical time in farming there is no doubt that this saying most definitely rings true right now. CAP, EU Biodiversity Strategy & Climate Change are key issues that will define farming for the coming decade and beyond.

In the current CAP proposals, the INHFA continues to push for a full flattening of Pillar 1 payments and a front loaded payment. In doing this we recognize that these policies not only deliver in terms of equal payment for the same conditions but it also provides the best means of protecting the greatest number of farmers.

In Pillar 2 the level of co-funding will be critical in how schemes are designed. On this we are calling for a budget increase of at least €250m to deliver an overall annual budget in excess of €850m. This is the minimum to deliver adequate supports for our suckler and sheep sectors. These supports must come in the form of welfare type schemes and not a carbon efficiency Programme as currently outlined for the suckler sector.

With regard to our Agri-environmental supports it is vital that we provide access to all farmers that are currently delivering on environmental outcomes and not exclude our private hill lands and those operating high nature value farming systems as was the case in GLAS.

Moving to the ongoing concerns of Climate Change and Biodiversity loss. A number of years ago we saw the Climate Change Advisory Council recommend that limits be put on our national herd. However, they went onto recommend that the suckler herd be reduced due to its lack of profitability. Through this recommendation they pointed the finger of blame at our suckler cows which unfortunately is a narrative that seems to have held.

Now when it comes to bodies such as the Climate Change Advisory Council I imagine their role is to assess emissions and their impact based on the science and not whether a sector is profitable or not. This is why it is vital that the Climate Change Advisory Council re-visits this and provides an updated view based entirely on science. If this is done I am confident that the suckler sector with its extensive farming systems will no longer be viewed as an ongoing threat in the battle against climate change.

Staying with the issues of Climate Change and Biodiversity and specifically proposals around a just transition. There needs to be a recognition that there will be a cost to farmers as they try to deliver on these. This cost will be seen through loss of agricultural output resulting in lower profits, additional regulation and additional labour costs.

How do we know this – because farmers operating on designated habitats namely SAC's & SPA's often referred to as the Natura 2000 sites have lived with these costs for the past 20 years. Unfortunately, they are still waiting for a just transition as they struggle with the 39 Notifiable Actions that undermines their farming activity and profit.

So when we assess what has happened here it doesn't bode well for the future. Like in any relationship and this is a relationship between the State and the farmer Trust is important and right now there is no trust. Again and again farmers have been ignored when they look for fair or just payment.

And it's not like they haven't delivering for the State. Based on the EU's own Nature Fitness Check the Natura 2000 network is delivering €2.5b each year to the Irish economy which translates into €3,000/ha. –For our farmers the only payment available to them is €79/ha but they have to join GLAS for this.

Now Minister I'm not blaming you for this - it has been ongoing for over 20 years now and to be fair this hasn't been under the control of the DAFM for some time. However, I am hopeful that you can see the problem here – not just for the farmers impacted but for the Government as you try to convince all farmers of your sincerity around the just transition.

Moving on I want to address the ongoing issue of Farm Incomes. Earlier I outlined INHFA policy on CAP and the need to deliver for as many farmers as possible. This is critical to the overall sector because every time we lose a farmer our sector and its lobbying power is weakened.

Of course there is a reason why farmers are leaving especially in our suckler and sheep sectors and that is low income. This low income has been driven by a cheap food policy instigated by the EEC decades ago. To compensate and ensure food production across Europe, CAP was expanded as a mechanism to support this and our farmers. While this worked for a period of time to everyone's benefit a stagnant CAP budget in recent times has contributed to the fall in incomes and the ongoing exodus from the land.

Unfortunately, low incomes and the ever increasing demands on farmers is also a factor in relation to farm safety. Farmers often on their own working long hours and under pressure to deliver are at a higher risk of a farm accident. Add to this the increasing age profile as we struggle to encourage inn younger farmers due to low income and you start to understand why farming across Europe is a higher risk sector than the army or police.

If Europe wants to continue with a cheap food policy while demanding higher environmental ambition they need to face the reality that the CAP budget will need to increase dramatically. To not do so is indicating to our farm families that their health and safety don't matter. This is a priority that needs to be addressed in the very near future. Can it be addressed in the upcoming CAP Programme – I don't know but we have to try.

Another issue of ongoing concern to the INHFA is the current Forestry Policy which continues to encourage the planting of Sitka spruce dominated forests to the detriment of our biodiversity and our rural communities. This has become a major issue in Leitrim and is a growing issue in many other counties. In our budget submission we outlined how the Afforestation Programme should only facilitate the planting of commercial broadleaf and native woodland. We also detailed how the scheme should only be available to genuine farmers that have farmed the land for a minimum of five years. Change on this is long overdue and I'm asking Minister McConalogue and Minister Hackett to consider carefully what we have proposed.

Finally – just want to say how it is great to be able have a live meeting. Hopefully this is the first of many live meetings we will have. It is my intention to get to as many branch and county meetings as possible in the coming weeks, and during my term as President. Today's turn-out considering the impact of the last 18 months is a clear indication from our branch and county officers of their determination to make the INHFA a dominant force in Irish agriculture.