

# This. *Farming* Life

What exactly does it mean to be a farmer in 2011? Five farmers from different sectors share their perspectives.

## Pat O'Flaherty – Pig Farmer, Rathangan, Co. Kildare

I always wanted to farm. My grandfather came up from the west of Ireland to Kildare and he had a small farm, 35 acres, and my father had 5 acres. I went to UCD and did agricultural science and when I came out I used to sell animal feed to pig farmers. That's how I got interested in pig farming. Eventually I got the opportunity to buy a farm and build the farm ourselves. That was 14 years ago.

The farm we have is about five acres. We have two sow units; we have 700 sows and a 500 sow unit and between them both we produce 500 pigs a week, 52 weeks of the year. It's approximately 50 tonnes of meat a week. And that then goes to the various different markets; supermarket shelves for the backs and the hams and the shoulder meat and belly is exported.

We have a major issue with the EPA at the moment. We produce two products; one is pigs and the other is organic

fertiliser and we sell both. What the EPA want us to do is in March of every year they want us to tell them where we're going with all our fertiliser, our slurry. And we've told them that we don't know where we're going because it depends on our customers who come along to purchase that product. They can't ask us to crystal ball gaze and know in advance where it's going.

The price of our feed has gone up vastly in the last two years. In 2011 and 2010 our feed went up about 40%, and when you think that feed is 70% of our input into the farm it's a massive increase for us. But that's all fine if the meat price goes up in relation to it. But the problem is that the meat price hasn't gone up and the feed price has. The net result is that we've had two bad years in 2010 and 2011.

Instead of giving our tale of woe, we've tried to do something positive about it. We've initiated a DNA scheme; we're the

first country in the world to introduce it in pork. Every boar in Ireland is tested and we have a database, which means that every piece of meat you pick up, whether it's rashers, sausages, bacon or cooked ham, we can test whether it's Irish or not. Because when meat's cut up and it's on a counter you've no way of tracing it unless you have a DNA scheme.

We have a big problem with guys who are putting green flags on and shamrocks on packets, putting stuff like Irish-style rashers and Irish recipe bacon and this type of thing, but it's not Irish meat. We've tied in with the Bord Bia logo which is why we're saying to customers if you don't see the Bord Bia logo, don't buy it because you're not certain where it's from.

I believe that consumers here and abroad will buy our product because it's an excellent product, probably one of the best in the world. From that point of view I would hope things would be more positive into the future.



## Robin Talbot – *Beef Farmer, Ballacolla, Co. Laois*

I would be fourth generation on this farm. My father died when I was young and my mother kept the farm going. I always assumed I'd farm and always wanted to farm. I came home from secondary school in 1972 and I've been here ever since.

The farm is about 230 hectares and our main farming system is autumn calving suckler cows. We have 220 suckler cows and about 600 in all, with cows, calves and followers. All our cows are Limousin. I like the Limousin cows, I think they're a good cow to produce a good calf.

All the females are finished at two years of age off grass, as beef. The best quality males are targeted for export at the weaning stage and the males that are left would be finished as bulls in the spring at 17-18 months of age.

We grow grass silage, maize silage and spring barley – everything would be fed on the farm. We try and focus as much on our grassland management as we can and with that in mind we have done quite

a bit of reseeded in the last few years.

When I came home from school we had just gone into the EU, it looked like prices were improving, people's attitudes to farming were improving, at that time everything was on the up. There was a lot of optimism. Then it flattened off.

From my point of view the most negative times were after the McSharry proposals when everything was premium driven, whereas we were always trying to produce the best quality animals we could. It was a little bit frustrating that it didn't matter how good your calving percentages were, if you didn't have your paperwork done right to claim the proper premiums, you just weren't doing the business.

Through the good times and the bad times I absolutely love farming and working with animals. The worst periods tend to be the most dramatic – you're flying along nicely then something like BSE hits, or foot and mouth hits, something you don't see coming and totally blindsides you. But we get through those too. I always have the attitude that

if the problem is outside the back door then it's not really a problem. You will get it sorted.

The price of what we're selling is extremely positive at the moment. The one thing I find amazing is that Ireland has been through boom times for the previous decade and beef was a very low price, and we're in a recession now and beef was never as high. You'd wonder where all the logic is.

The whole future of beef farms is up in the air because of the reform of CAP coming down the road. Like all these proposals, there'll be winners and losers and until such time as we see the fine print, I just don't know if I'll be a winner or a loser in it.

Beef is a good, safe product and a healthy product to eat. The world population is growing and I would like to think Irish farmers will be able to produce food to help feed that growing population. If the political will is there to allow us to do it, this little island of ours can feed an awful lot of people.



## Michael Keegan – Sheep Farmer, Glencree, Co. Wicklow

**W**e have just short of 400 female breeding sheep here, they're all pedigree registered Lleyn. Our farm is 170 acres, with around 20 acres of forestry mixed in; it's been in the family for a couple of hundred years. I've never known anything else; I was born here, reared here. We've always been farming in this area.

The Lleyn lambs seem to have a very fine taste, they eat well. It wouldn't be a common breed in Ireland but it is getting more popular because of the merits of the breed. It's very prolific and you could probably graze three Lleyns where you graze two of anything else. You can keep more of them per acre and they'll have more lambs. So the feed costs are going down and you're still getting a very good crop out of them. They're exceptionally good mothers, very good milkers and they seem to be very good at taking care of their lambs. It takes some of the work out of sheep farming.

Everybody's talking about how good farming is and how well of farmers are, but that's mainly in the media. Farming's

still not an easy thing to make a living off. The sheep on their own don't make enough money, they don't make anything really. In terms of income the single farm payment is the big paycheck in the year. It's a sad thing to say because I would much rather get paid for my product and not have to get handouts from the state but that's the system we have. I would be worried that with the CAP reform we are going to get an awful lot less in terms of direct payments. It's time to look at diversification and to find something else.

We are opening a farm shop here on 19th November, which is a new venture for us. We'll be selling artisan food products; cheeses, jams, relishes, bread – local produce. We're going to try and buy it all from local producers and keep it 100% Irish. We're in a great location here because we're right on the Powerscourt waterfall road so we've got a lot of passing trade. Even though there's a recession on, people still seem to be keen to buy good, local produce. I sell my own lamb here now in a box and people love it.

At the moment there's a little bit of confidence in the sheep sector but if the price goes backwards at all, lads are just going to walk away. We certainly are doing an awfully lot better than we did, but you have to remember that we have come from a very low point. I'm not complaining, it's fantastic to see a resurgence in the price, but it needs to stay that way.

There's going to be severe cuts in the next budget and we all recognise there has to be, but the government needs to be careful when considering the cut in the agricultural budget. At this moment in time, farming is playing a big part in helping this economy on its road to recovery and it would be foolish in the extreme if they were to cut the head off the goose that's laying the golden egg.

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## Bryan Daniels – Dairy Farmer, Mullinavat, Co.Kilkenny

**W**e have a spring calving dairy herd and we milk 180 cows. There's myself and my brother in a partnership here and there have been nine generations of my family farming on this farm. About four years ago we decided to concentrate solely on dairy and the whole focus of the farm at the moment is to stock the farm fully with milking stock.

I've become a pedigree farmer. I always had an interest in breeding stock and following what cow families are working in the herd. When I came home to milk at first there was a mix of breeds on the farm and after three years of management I found the Friesian was the cow that was really suiting our system. As a result we've gone down the route of breeding pure Friesians.

Our milk would go for dried milk powders, cheeses and food ingredients such as wheys. This year was a very good year for a lot of dairy farmers in terms of growing grass and looking after stock. In terms of international prices we're receiving one of the highest prices we've had, well above the ten-year average at the moment. There's a very positive buzz around and demand for milk on the international market is still there so it's looking good for next year as well.

The big thing that really set dairy farming up was the introduction of the economic breeding index. We have an index now that can tell us what each bull is going to deliver to its daughter that is going to eventually milk in our herd. It gives us a better choice in terms of what animals we're breeding. The animals that we're breeding now have a stronger fertility index which means they can last for more years. The volume and the solids in the milk we're now producing would be higher as well. We're also starting to identify cows that have better

resistance to the likes of mastitis.

On 1st April 2015, the EU milk quotas that were introduced in 1982 are being abolished. It's setting Ireland up for what will probably be easily a 50% increase in milk production over the following years. We need to work on getting a stronger identity to market this milk because all this milk will be marketed as exports, it will be going outside the country.

We haven't copped on to the reputation that we have or we could have yet. We're definitely the greenest country in Europe and our cows are outside grazing on their natural

foodstuff in their natural environment. It's definitely the best way to produce food and that's what the customers are going to be looking for.

I couldn't see any other industry or career providing the lifestyle or profit that a spring calving dairy herd can deliver when it's done correctly. There are a few jobs I'd prefer I didn't have to do, such as scraping down yards or dealing with the messy end, but when I'm out on the farm I just don't think of it as a job. It's something I enjoy doing and something that comes naturally to me. No matter where I go, I'm always thinking in terms of dairy cows.



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## Helen Harris – *Tillage Farmer, Clane, Co. Kildare*

I started on the farm ten years ago. I did have another life before this; I thought I was going to be a very independent woman as it were. I went to college and did hotel and catering management. And it came to harvest time here and my husband Philip said 'get up on that tractor and plough the field' and I've never looked back.

We farm as a team and it works really well. There was a survey done in New Zealand about successful farms and the only thing they had in common was partnership. If you have somebody working on the farm with you, there's not just a financial gain, it's really good for both of you. The secret is patience and a sense of humour. And you have to be able to get over an argument very quickly.

Between the whole lot we farm about 500 acres; we own some, we rent some and we share-farm some. It's split this year between wheat and barley and we have a little bit of grass that we have in silage.

We forward sell, which means that we sold some of this year's crop last year. We try and forward sell a third to try and cover the costs of that year, another third or quarter around November time, and then the rest of it we normally sell in the spring. It helps cash flow, because if you've forward sold crops for the following year you already know you're going to get money in. It means you'll never get the top price, but you'll never get the bottom price.

My mum and dad have a farm in Tipperary which is beef and sheep and my brother has a dairy farm in Birr. When we have a family dinner we can never agree because when I'm happy because the price of grain is going up, neither of them are happy.

The price of grain is linked to the barrel of oil, so the year that you're going to get a good price is the year that you're going to have the high costs. It's all linked. For us, the harvest is a huge expense. We spent over €20k this year in diesel,

just for the harvest. We have our own drier and our own combine, we cut it all ourselves and dry it all ourselves and store it all ourselves.

Crop husbandry is where the skill of being a tillage farmer is. This is what my husband is extremely good at. As the crop is growing you're constantly looking at it, checking the roots, checking the head of it, checking the welfare of that little plant. And you're saying: 'Is there disease pressure? Is there aphid pressure? Does it need growth regulation? Does it need fertiliser?'

I find it really ironic that people in an office in Europe are telling people who enjoy and love nature how to be good to nature. I think it should be the other way round. I think they should be asking farmers: 'What can we do to help improve the natural environment? What can we do to improve the quality of water?' I think farmers have the answers.