

Submission under public consultation process on the draft Food Harvest 2020 Environmental Analysis Report

Submission by Cork Food Policy Council

The recently-formed Cork Food Policy Council (CFPC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission as part of the public consultation process on the draft Environmental Analysis Report (EAR) conducted on Food Harvest 2020 (FH2020). In our view the need to create the CFPC – which joins a growing worldwide movement of similar civic initiatives - is partly a response to a style of agricultural policy preoccupied with output growth at the expense of a more holistic analysis that considers the social, nutritional and health aspects of the food system. In our view FH2020 fails to recognise the significance of the challenges facing us both in Ireland and elsewhere in the world, and the seriousness of what are being called the ‘New Fundamentals’ (see below).

We note the headline objectives that are set out in FH2020 are to achieve substantial increases by volume and value in milk, beef, pork and other products. Dairy and meat occupy front and centre of this strategy, and we regard this emphasis as very deeply flawed. The case has surely been made by other submissions regarding the consequences of this productivist strategy for the likely failure to meet our international obligations with regard to limits on greenhouse gas emissions. We note how the draft EAR is easily reassured by talk of ‘high technology, best production methods and new efficiencies’, such that we can proceed to substantially increase output in the belief that this will have ‘imperceptible consequences’ for the environment: surely a case of having our cake and eating it too! And as if this self-delusion wasn’t enough, FH2020 creates a smokescreen of meaningless buzzwords (‘smart’, ‘green’, ‘sustainable’) that serves to shroud the exercise in a mantle of ‘greenwash’.

We draw to your attention the body of important scientific work that over the past five or so years has highlighted the serious challenges that lie immediately ahead of us as a global community; challenges that require a new direction in public policy for food and livelihood security under increasingly constrained environmental conditions. Climate change, depletion of freshwater resources, tightening energy markets, and pressure on arable land are amongst the most pressing ‘New Fundamentals’ shaping not only the global food system, but the global economy. It is for this reason that the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, stated that “the current agricultural knowledge, science and technology model requires revision. Business as usual is no longer an option” (IAASTD, 2009).

It is in this context that we regard a strategy of agricultural specialisation to be seriously misplaced. This path offers a future of ever more reduced room for manoeuvre as we bank on optimum conditions for grass growth to support rising livestock numbers. Should climatic conditions prove uncooperative – as was demonstrated in the early spring of 2013 – then we will need to revert to greater reliance on imported feedstuffs, grown on prime arable land in other countries to feed Irish animals. This is a strategy promising a future of greater vulnerability - not increased resilience – for Irish agriculture.

More critically still, we regard a strategy of feeding people – people who are already food secure - products that are high on the nutritional pyramid to be morally questionable. At a time when close to one billion people are hungry and malnourished for want of basic staples, it is necessary to ask whether contributing to the growing volume of meat consumption in rich and middle-income countries is appropriate. The medical evidence is very clear: diets high in animal fats are directly implicated in rising rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease and diet-related cancers. The nutritional advice is to eat less meat, not more.

Indeed, the twin challenges of livestock's contribution to climate change and the role of meat in dietary ill-health will trigger, in our view, policy change in Europe within the next decade. In Scandinavia think-tanks are already recommending a sliding scale of taxation that would make beef more expensive and encourage a consumer shift toward poultry and fish. By 2025 when such policies are being introduced within Europe, Irish agriculture will be irredeemably set on a course of producing red meat and milk on large agri-industrial units entirely disconnected from the requirements of the domestic market which will be met by imported food. This is surely a short-sighted - even negligent - course of action when all the signs point to a future of rising and volatile global food prices.

We understand that anticipating the future is a hazardous business, but there are important signposts in view that indicate the likelihood of environmental and policy change. The incidence (that some medical experts are calling a 'world-wide epidemic') in rates of obesity and diet-related disease with their attendant costs for health services everywhere will inevitably bring change in public policy around meat consumption. And new scientific evidence suggesting that we have grossly under-estimated thus far the true contribution of livestock-derived emissions of greenhouse gases (by up to a factor of three) will also make itself felt in global agricultural trade.

We believe Ireland does have the potential to be a sustainable producer of high quality food into the future and animal products are likely to be a part of that mix. But the strategy of specialisation and intensification set out under FH2020 – and rather cheered along by the EAR – is not a suitable course of action. We strongly recommend a wider review that would bring into sharper relief the need for Irish agriculture to become more closely coupled with

the domestic market and be more responsive to a national food policy ensuring a sustainable and healthy diet for all.

Cork Food Policy Council is an initiative of many different stakeholders across the food system and includes on its Steering Committee representatives from health, food retailing, farming, catering, community, education and local government sectors. The CFPC is working towards the achievement of a fairer, healthier, sustainable and resilient food system across the Cork region and, to this end, seeks to promote socially-inclusive engagement in supporting best practice in the production, retail and consumption of food.

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