

Cows eat grass, don't they?

IRELAND SUMMARY

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The 'Cows eat grass, don't they?' social science project ran from 2018-2021 and looked at industry and farmer views on the future of grass-based, higher-feed-input and indoor dairy systems in the UK and Ireland. The research in Ireland involved a survey with 396 dairy farmers, and interviews with 18 key stakeholders (from government, industry, charities, research) and 20 dairy farmers.

Findings:

- **Support for grass-based over higher-feed-input systems** among the majority of key stakeholders and farmers who took part in the survey and interviews.
- **A 'good farmer' is a good grass farmer.** The success of the grass-based system was based on concerted advisory and research support that helped create a common definition of a 'good farmer' as someone who has grass management skills and produces high volumes of grass.
- **Good farming is intensive grass management.** This definition of a 'good farmer' included intensive production that aims to maximise grass yields using fertiliser inputs, which may conflict with current industry and government goals to lower the environmental footprint of the dairy sector.
- **'The environment' is toxic.** Farmers I spoke to felt a connection to the natural world around them, enjoyed working outside and some took pride in their role as stewards of the land. However, they felt there was a big divide between them and the non-farming public on the issue and they felt blamed and vilified.
- **Alternatives to expansion?** Farmers I engaged with in the research had many positive views about post-quotas expansion but also felt social and systemic pressure to expand which could be at odds with other goals in their life including work life balance. Farmers who couldn't expand were worried about the future of their farm.

Recommendations for government/industry:

- **Redefining good farming.** In order to meet environmental targets, foster a definition of 'good farming' that includes environmental practices and values, and good work life balance, as well as production and profitability.
- **Build on farmer's own beliefs and practices relating to the environment.** Farmers' own knowledge, experience and goals could be combined with research and policy objectives to define what 'good farming' should look like in a sustainable dairy sector. Farmer-led environmental goals could be identified through discussion fora.
- **Future without expansion?** If there is a desire to adhere to the statement in the Ag Climatise strategy and the draft agri-food strategy 2030 that the national herd cannot expand further, then measures need to support farms to make money through means other than expansion, or the dairy industry will undergo restructuring with fewer, bigger farms.
- **Supporting smaller farms.** If supporting smaller family farms and in turn rural communities is an objective of the industry and/or government, implement mechanisms to do so, such as strengthening alternative supply chains and paying farmers for the production of environmental goods