

Agricultural Consultants Association [‘ACA’] Launches First Major Review of Farm Advisory Services in Over 3 Decades

Majority of Irish farmers and farm advisers miss out on publicly funded research, tools and training at critical time for Irish agriculture

Public Private Collaboration key to bridging knowledge gap on-farms and to delivering behavioural change

Irish Farmers are ill-served by a dated farm advisory model that pitches private sector advisers in competition with Teagasc at a time when collaboration is required to deliver better outcomes for Irish farmers. That is according to a new report undertaken by Jim Power, Economist and commissioned by the Agricultural Consultants Association [‘ACA’] whose members provide advisory services to 55,000 farmers nationwide.

Entitled *‘Recalibrating Advisory Services for a new Era in Irish Farming’* the report is the first major review of farm advisory services since the establishment of Teagasc 31 years ago. At a time of dramatic changes in agriculture and food production and evolving consumer and regulatory demands, the over-arching recommendations of the ACA Report are to:

- Build knowledge-based farming and move more farmers up the value chain
- Bridge the accessibility gap between available research and its application on farm
- Provide structured training to ensure private advisors are equipped to facilitate delivery of evolving CAP policy and climate change objectives
- Build stronger, more impactful and more efficient public and private sector research and advisory supports through increased Public Private Collaboration

Of an estimated 137,500 farmers in Ireland 82% work with a farm adviser; of these, over one third (almost 43,000 farmers) are advised by Teagasc at a delivery cost of almost €40 million per annum, of which €27 million is public funding. Just under two thirds (70,000) are advised by the private sector with zero public funding. As a result of this split, a majority of Irish farmers miss out on critical, publicly funded research and information tools that are only freely available via Teagasc advisers. Most farmers also lose out as private sector advisers have no access to publicly funded training valued at c €9,000 per annum to Teagasc advisers.

Report author Jim Power said “Agri-food accounts for 7.7% of Gross National Income, 173,000 jobs and €13.7bn in export income, or 10% of total exports. A knowledge economy is as critical for Irish farming as it is for Foreign Direct Investment [‘FDI’]. To succeed, Irish farmers will need to have the highest level of skills and knowledge possible and be at the cutting edge of the science that is increasingly driving global food production. Knowledge based farming needs smarter resourcing to combine the reach and expertise of private practitioners with the research capability and resourcing of Teagasc. It’s a model that needs to move from ‘Form-Filling’ advice on EU schemes to increased application of Teagasc’s leading edge research on more and more Irish farms.”

Owen O’Driscoll, President ACA said: “Farm advisers are uniquely positioned to influence behavioural changes on-farm and to support the delivery of national and international policy objectives on issues like sustainability and climate change. Simply put, sectoral targets cannot and will not be achieved if private sector advisers who account for 62% of the farm advisory market, have

to create and drive a long term strategic plan; advocacy for the network and its farmer clients and ensuring closer cooperation with Teagasc.

3. **Shared research and data:** make publicly funded research and data available free to all appropriately qualified farm advisers across the public and private sector
4. **Smart tools:** enhance advisory support by making essential online technology applications available to all qualified advisers e.g.
 - a. Nutrient Management Systems
 - b. Profit Monitor Systems
 - c. Marginal Abatement Cost Curve [MACC] tools
 - d. New and emerging smart applications to improve knowledge transfer and application on farm
5. **Specialisation and playing to strengths:** Assess scope for greater specialisation e.g. Teagasc concentrating on its Research strengths complemented on the advisory side by ACA's larger adviser and office network.
6. **Continuous professional development (CPD):** Farming has become very technical as the standards expected from food producers have changed and continue to change in a very significant way. To provide the required level of service, all advisors, both public and private sector, should have access to shared training and upskilling opportunities
7. **Public tenders:** promote efficiency by tendering sector schemes or campaigns
8. **Promote accessibility:** Cross promotion of adviser networks and / or events
9. **Knowledge Transfer Forum:** Establish an annual Knowledge Transfer Forum for the agri sector to explore sector challenges and opportunities.
10. **Develop Joint campaigns:** to promote upskilling and knowledge application on farms

About ACA:

The Agricultural Consultants Association (ACA) comprises in excess of 400 professional, technical and administrative staff operating from 160 member offices nationwide. Members advise c. 55,000 farmers, making ACA the largest advisory body in Ireland. ACA members must have a minimum of a level 8 qualification in Agriculture, Horticulture or Forestry.

Department of Agriculture, Forestry and the Marine figures show that ACA members completed 80 per cent of all applications for TAMS; 76 per cent of all Nutrient Management Plans completed; 56 per cent all applications for GLAS; 50 per cent of all Knowledge Transfer (KT) groups; and 56 per cent of all applications for Basic Payments.