



SECURING THE FUTURE OF OUR FAMILY FARMS



Martin Kenny TD

Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Agriculture and Rural Affairs



Introduction

The family farm is at the heart of every rural community across the country. Many are the foundation of local rural economies, and for decades have led the way where rural development is concerned. Farmers and their families know the land and their livestock best. This has been the case for generations, and should be the role that family farms play for generations to come. However, if we continue on the current trajectory that has been set out by this government which has seen so many young people leave the family farm, we are at serious risk of losing our family farms.

There has never been so many challenges facing our family farms. We must acknowledge that the next generation is not guaranteed and this has to be corrected before it is too late. Farmers have the solutions, which must be supported by a Minister who is just as invested in continuing this vital tradition as they are.

Sinn Féin will stand with farmers, and we are ready to plan and respond to this challenge.

Family farming in crisis

There are many challenges facing farmers across the sector that are uncontrollable, such as the changing weather conditions which have real implications on managing fodder and the follow-on impact this has on slurry spreading. It has been clear for some time now that farming by a strict calendar cannot continue. Time and again, farmers call – quite rightly – for changes to the strict schedules imposed on them by the department and indeed by the ever-changing EU directives.

The adversarial treatment of farmers by the state and EU bodies must come to an end if we are to succeed in delivering the basics in the farming and agriculture sector, and to continue the tradition of family farming in Ireland.

Furthermore, issues with the unreliability of schemes, the increase in production costs, and price volatility has led many to leave the sector, or for their children to make the difficult decision not to take over the family farm. At a time when the cost of living continues to increase, farming incomes have fallen across all farming

sectors. The results of the most recent Teagasc National Farm survey show that the income for suckler farmers have fallen by 15% - the lowest levels recorded.¹

Farmers are feeling frustrated and, in many cases, are worried about the future. Sons and daughters are emigrating, others are at home - some who would take on the farm, others who would not, but for those that would consider it, they have much more to consider than the generations before them.

Agriculture is our oldest and biggest indigenous industry. If any other industry faced such an uncertain future, action would be taken. For centuries, farmers have been the custodians of the land, and their produce has sustained our communities, and become the backbone of many local economies in rural Ireland. It is vital we take steps now to prevent a further exodus from farming and the agriculture sector.

Housing in rural Ireland is a key component of any roadmap for farming. Many rural families face the prospect of having to move out of their villages because of planning laws which are weighed against them and the development of self-built, rural homes. Sinn Féin have already committed to delivering 25,000 self-build, rural homes over the course of five years if in government.² However, we must also focus on the immediate threats and difficulties within the sector itself, and plan accordingly.

Sinn Féin want to establish a Commission on the Future of the Family Farm, which would bring together stakeholders and experts tasked with bringing forward proposals on the key challenges facing our family farms, including on generational renewal, succession, tackling climate action in a fair way, moving to more sustainable practices, and supporting young Farmers and Women Farmers (often not recognised) into key roles on the family farm.

Without a clear roadmap and specific, reliable supports from government, the exodus from farming will continue. Our commitment to establishing a Commission on the Future of the Family Farm will go a long way to building this roadmap in conjunction with farmers and their families.

¹ Teagasc (2023). *Farm Business - Extent of 2023 farm income drop confirmed* - Teagasc | Agriculture and Food Development Authority. [Available here.](#)

² Sinn Féin (2024). *A Home of Your Own: Sinn Féin's Plan to Make Housing Affordable.* [Available here.](#)

It is important that Farmers are seen and treated as key stakeholders in agricultural policy development and decision-making. Sinn Féin believe that, with the right engagement and appropriate supports, the future of our family farms can be secured for many generations to come.

Commission on the Future of the Family Farm

Honouring a long-standing commitment, Sinn Féin introduced legislation seeking the establishment of a Commission on the Future of the Family Farm in April 2024.³ The proposal has also been included in our most recent general election manifesto and subsequent annual alternative budget publications.

The Commission would examine the key challenges facing family farms, engaging with experts, including Farmers themselves, and make recommendations on proposed action by Government to meet these challenges.

Wide-ranging discussions with farmers and stakeholders took place during the development of the legislation, and the following topics were suggested as points of examination for the Commission:

- **Economic viability and strengthening the position of farmers and producers in the agri-food chain;**
- **Generational renewal and succession planning;**
- **Increasing the recognition and participation of women in farming;**
- **Increasing the number of young farmers; and**
- **Ensuring that family farms are supported in assisting the State in meeting climate obligations.**

³ Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024. [Available here.](#)

This list is not exhaustive, however these topics were amongst the most important for farmers during the consultation process.

What would the Commission look like?

The Commission would be made up of a Chairperson and ten ordinary members. It would include farmers, farm organisations, those with an expertise in economics and rural development, following an open expressions of interest process. The Chairperson would be nominated by the Minister for Agriculture, but the nomination will have to go before both the Dáil and the Seanad for approval. They would be independent from Government. Farmers and producers would have a seat at the table, as well as ensuring representation of young farmers and women in agriculture.

Farmers have the answers to some of these issues. They want to stay in the sector, but it has to be viable. Their voices are vital to the success of this commission.



What would the commission do?

The main purpose of the Commission would be to carefully examine ways in which the number of family owned and managed farms across Ireland can be maintained and increased. Its role would be to examine the key challenges facing our family farms and bring forward actions that can be taken to support them.

The Commission would look at harnessing opportunities for innovation and diversification in agriculture, alongside other relevant measures to support family farms into the future.

As part of their work the Commission would also examine opportunities to promote greater public understanding of food production, food security, and recognition of differing farm systems and food production methods. This would include exploring methods to ensure that farmers receive a fair price for their product, particularly for premium produce, as well as methods to insulate farmers against price volatility.

Regarding diversification, the Commission would look at opportunities for farmers to diversify into various areas: such as organic production, novel food production, green energy production, carbon farming, new food types or categories and other areas as appropriate. Consideration would also be given to the possibilities of mixed farm systems which enhance the State's climate, biodiversity, or food security objectives.

The Commission would also be tasked with identifying and putting forward proposals on how farmers can contribute towards meeting climate action targets in a fair and practical manner. Further considerations by the committee would also include examining opportunities to enhance and develop the all-island agricultural policy. Part of the discussion must focus on the development of an all-island animal identification system and all-island approaches to the prevention and eradication of animal diseases.

Following consideration of the objectives set out above, the Commission would produce a report which would be presented to the Oireachtas.

Sinn Féin believe that the establishment of a Commission on the Future of the Family Farm would be hugely beneficial for maintaining and increasing the number of family-run farms and securing their viability for future generations.

Our timeline for results

Once established, the Commission will have 12 months to complete its consideration of the topics, as laid out in their work programme, and submit its report within 13 months.⁴

The recommendations made by the Commission will be brought to both the Minister for Agriculture and before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Within three months of receiving the report, the report will go before the Dáil where the Government will clearly outline their response to each recommendation made by the Commission. They will be obliged to provide an explanation for any recommendations they are rejecting and a clear timeline on implementation of recommendations accepted.

Avoiding a talking shop

These measures, committed to in legislation brought forward by Claire Kerrane TD and Matt Carthy TD ensure that real solutions are brought forward to support the regeneration of the sector.

While a recent commitment by government to establish a similar Commission is welcome, Sinn Féin have serious concerns that it will serve as nothing more than window dressing – an all too often occurrence. This government has been in place in one iteration or another since 2016. Yet they have delivered less and less every year, while putting a heavier burden on farmers and their families. Farmers deserve real, tangible outcomes to stop the exodus of families from the sector.

The Minister's proposal lacks time-measured, real commitment – enshrined in legislation – to examine and resolve the issues farmers continue to bring forward. Our legislation is there and it has the ability to provide a way forward.

Cost

We have provided €500,000 for the establishment of the Commission on the Future of the Family Farm in our Alternative Budget.⁵

⁴ *Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024*. [Available here](#).

⁵ Sinn Féin (2023). *Alternative Budget 2024*. [online] [Available here](#).

Conclusion

Sinn Féin are committed to delivering fair play for farmers. This means equitable treatment, a common-sense approach to schemes and grants, and ensuring the voices of all farmers are heard loud and clear.

We must see the basics delivered in farming and agriculture if we hope to encourage and continue the tradition of family farming in Ireland. This means clear timelines for consultation, recommendations, and actions. Sinn Féin have delivered the legislation to underpin this and ensure the sustainable growth of family farming in Ireland.





Securing the future of our family farms



Martin Kenny TD

SLIGO-LEITRIM

Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Agriculture and Rural Affairs

☎ 071 962 0000 | 087 652 8318

✉ martin.kenny@oireachtas.ie

