Who tells farming's story best?

Mapping the voices shaping the future of agriculture

A report for

NUFFIELD IRELAND
Farming Scholarships

By Niall Hurson
2024 Nuffield Scholar

July 2025

Disclaimer

© 2025 Nuffield Ireland.
All rights reserved.

This publication has been prepared in good faith on the basis of information available at the date of publication without any independent verification. Nuffield Ireland does not guarantee or warrant the accuracy, reliability, completeness of currency of the information in this publication nor its usefulness in achieving any purpose.

Readers are responsible for assessing the relevance and accuracy of the content of this publication. Nuffield Ireland will not be liable for any loss, damage, cost or expense incurred or arising by reason of any person using or relying on the information in this publication.

Products may be identified by proprietary or trade names to help readers identify particular types of products, but this is not, and is not intended to be, an endorsement or recommendation of any product or manufacturer referred to. Other products may perform as well or better than those specifically referred to.

This publication is copyright. However, Nuffield Ireland encourages wide dissemination of its research, providing the organisation is clearly acknowledged. For any enquiries concerning reproduction or acknowledgement contact the Executive Secretary.

Report author Niall Hurson

Scholar Contact Details
Niall Hurson
Tyredigan, Smithborough, Co Monaghan.
Phone: +353 83 191 8325
Email: niall.hurson1@gmail.com

In submitting this report, the Scholar has agreed to Nuffield Ireland publishing this material in its edited form.

NUFFIELD IRELAND Contact Details
Catherine Lascurettes
Executive, Nuffield Ireland
Phone: +353-86-2691197
Email: exec@nuffield.ie

Executive Summary

Who tells the story of farming and why does it matter?
This report investigates how agriculture's public narrative is shaped, who controls it, and what must be done to ensure that farmers are not just characters in the story, but its lead authors.

Irish agriculture stands at a critical juncture. While farmers remain essential to food security, environmental stewardship, and rural livelihoods, their social licence, the trust and approval of the public, is under unprecedented strain. Narratives about farming are increasingly shaped by policymakers, media, and environmental activists, many of whom lack direct experience in the sector. As a result, farming's political influence is weakening, public misunderstanding is growing, and mental health among farmers is deteriorating.

At the same time, global competitors like Brazil and India are scaling up, ready to fill the void if European agriculture falters. Meanwhile, domestic farmers must navigate increasingly complex climate regulations, trade pressures, and shifting consumer values, often with limited support or understanding.

Drawing from global field research across six continents, this report identifies the key forces shaping agriculture's image, highlights strategies from high-performing farming nations, and offers a practical roadmap for farmers, industry leaders, and policymakers to reclaim control of farming's story.

Key Findings:

- **Farmers must own the narrative.** Outsiders cannot authentically represent farming's reality. Change begins from within.
- **Political representation is fragmented.** A disunited lobby weakens farming's ability to influence policy at national and EU level.
- **Public trust is fragile**. Transparency, sustainability, and clear communication are essential to maintain farming's social licence.
- **Environmental and financial goals must align.** Farmers adopt change when the benefits are tangible and realistic.
- **Nature must be financially valued.** As Brazil's deforestation illustrates, forests will fall as long as felling is more profitable than conservation.
- **PR campaigns are no substitute for authenticity.** Direct, farmer-led engagement builds lasting credibility.
- **Consumers matter.** Trust in food producers is hard-won and easily lost, and must not be taken for granted.

Recommendations:

- **From PR to people.** Ensure initiatives like Our Food Connects prioritise authentic, farmer-led communication to build genuine public trust and engagement.
- **Don't dignify anti-farm lobbyists with engagement.** Defensive reactions only amplify negative narratives.
- **Reward sustainability.** Introduce differential environmental payments that incentivise best practice.
- **Educate early.** Make agricultural science a core subject in schools to bridge the urban-rural divide.
- **Think globally, act strategically.** Rather than opposing trade deals like Mercosur, export Irish agri-expertise to help shape sustainable systems abroad.
- **Incentivise global forest conservation.** Develop EU-backed mechanisms where conservation pays.
- **Refine, not reject, the CAP.** Subsidies remain essential but must be targeted, just, and future-focused.

- **Promote innovation with impact.** Showcase agriculture's contribution to climate, community, and economy.
- **Rebuild political influence.** A united farming voice with a long-term vision is essential for renewed credibility.
- **Prepare for 2026.** Use Ireland's EU Council presidency as a strategic platform to elevate agricultural priorities.

Recommendations explained

The findings of this report point to a clear conclusion: if farmers do not shape the public narrative of agriculture, others will, often without the insight, balance, or credibility the role demands. While Irish consumers continue to show strong support for farmers, maintaining that trust and rebuilding influence and resilience requires more than good intentions; it demands bold, practical action. The following recommendations are grounded in global field research, informed by best practice from high-performing agricultural nations, and tailored to the political, social, and environmental realities facing Irish farmers. They are not exhaustive, but they are achievable, if met with unity, clarity of purpose, and a willingness to lead from within.

From PR to people
Ensure initiatives like Our Food Connects prioritise authentic, farmer-led communication to build genuine public trust and engagement.

Irish agriculture's public image cannot be outsourced. As initiatives like Our Food Connects aim to unify the sector's message, it is critical that these campaigns are fronted by farmers themselves, not polished exclusively by PR professionals. As journalist and farmer Darragh McCullough argues, "If your narrative is a bad one, it will still stink no matter how nicely you tell everyone it smells." Credibility comes from lived experience, not branding.

Rather than controlling the message, initiatives like Our Food Connects should enable diverse farmer voices to take centre stage. This means equipping farmers with communication skills, media access, and platforms to engage the public directly, from digital storytelling to community events. Farmer-led transparency is not just more believable; it is more effective. To maintain and strengthen public trust, people must hear directly from those who work the land, not just those who represent it.

Don't dignify anti-farm lobbyists with engagement
Defensive reactions only amplify negative narratives.

In a hyper-connected media environment, not all criticism deserves a reply. Engaging directly with anti-farm lobbyists often lends them legitimacy and oxygen, while dragging farmers into unwinnable public debates. As New Zealand dairy leader Cameron Henderson cautions, "Going to war with these people is just not a good idea. It makes you look defensive." His advice: focus on quiet, behind-the-scenes progress and let actions speak louder than outrage.

Social media algorithms reward outrage and polarisation. When farmers react emotionally to provocative claims, they risk amplifying them inadvertently spreading misinformation to wider audiences. Instead, Irish agriculture should invest in long-term narrative resilience: transparent data, farmer-led content, and credible spokespeople who stay above the fray.

This is not about staying silent it's about being strategic. Engage where it matters: with the public, policymakers, and fair-minded media. Let others chase headlines. Farmers must focus on building trust, not trading barbs.

Reward sustainability

Introduce differential environmental payments that incentivise best practice.

Farmers change behaviour when the benefits are tangible, and the system is fair. Across my global research, one clear lesson emerges: sustainability must be financially viable to succeed. New Zealand's Fonterra co-op has already embraced this model, introducing differential payments based on environmental performance. "It's a small gap now," says dairy farmer Cameron Henderson, "but as it widens, it will really change behaviour."

Ireland should adopt a similar approach through its implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy. Rather than one-size-fits-all supports, environmental payments must be structured to reward those who exceed basic compliance not just those who meet it. This means recognising measurable efforts in nutrient management, biodiversity, and emissions reduction.

Such incentives don't just drive better outcomes; they demonstrate to the public that Irish farmers are proactive stewards of the land. Sustainability must be more than a slogan it should be a profitable pathway for those who lead with integrity and innovation.

Educate early
Make agricultural science a core subject in schools to bridge the urban–rural divide.

Public perception of farming is often shaped not by experience, but by distance both geographic and generational. As noted throughout this report, the growing urban-rural divide has contributed to widespread misunderstanding of modern agriculture. Many policymakers and consumers lack basic knowledge of how food is produced, how land is managed, or what sustainability looks like on the ground.

To address this, agricultural education must start earlier and reach wider. Making agricultural science a core component of secondary school curricula, not just an elective for rural students, would equip the next generation with critical thinking, environmental literacy, and a grounded understanding of food systems. Switzerland's approach, where school visits to farms are routine and widely supported, offers a model for reconnecting young people with agriculture from an early age.

This is not just about curriculum reform it's a long-term investment in social licence, civic understanding, and the future of informed food policy.

Think globally, act strategically
Rather than simply opposing trade deals like Mercosur, Ireland should seek to collaborate internationally, sharing and learning through partnerships that support sustainable farming systems abroad.

Irish agriculture has too often adopted a defensive stance toward international trade agreements, particularly Mercosur. While environmental and animal welfare concerns are legitimate, outright resistance risks sidelining Ireland from the global conversation on sustainable food production. Field research across Brazil and India highlights the scale and momentum of emerging agricultural powerhouses. If Europe, and Ireland in particular, disengages, others will shape the rules of engagement.

Rather than retreat, Ireland should position itself as a contributor of solutions. Its strengths in pasture-based systems, emissions mitigation, traceability, and co-operative governance offer credible templates for sustainable development elsewhere. These assets can be strategically leveraged to support and influence sustainability standards within future trade agreements.

Engagement does not mean endorsement, it means leadership. Exporting knowledge and principles, not just products, offers a pathway to shape global agriculture in a way that aligns with Irish values and interests.

Incentivise global forest conservation
Develop EU-backed mechanisms where conservation pays.

Environmental rhetoric will not stop deforestation, economics will. As Governor Eduardo Riedel of Mato Grosso do Sul stated during the Nuffield Contemporary Scholars Conference in Brazil, “If a tree values more on the ground than standing, probably this area will still be the frontier of agriculture.” This stark reality underscores the urgent need to make conservation economically viable, particularly in regions where land clearing is still more profitable than preservation.

As part of the EU, Ireland can advocate for constructive international approaches that help make forest conservation financially viable especially in regions where economic pressures currently drive deforestation.

Without global economic structures that make conservation competitive with deforestation, international climate targets will remain out of reach. Europe must lead and Ireland can be a principled voice in driving that leadership.

Refine, not reject, the CAP
Subsidies remain essential but must be targeted, just, and future-focused.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is often criticised for being overly bureaucratic or distorting markets, yet it remains the financial backbone of many European farms, including in Ireland. Calls to dismantle or radically deregulate CAP overlook the role it plays in sustaining rural communities, delivering public goods, and enabling long-term environmental ambition.

During fieldwork in Australia, the limitations of a market-only model were evident. Without safety nets, ethical standards and ecological safeguards are easily compromised in pursuit of short-term survival. In contrast, CAP, for all its flaws, provides a framework where food security, environmental responsibility, and social cohesion can co-exist.

While major CAP reform may be constrained by recent EU budget shifts, there is still an urgent need to target payments more effectively, rewarding measurable outcomes such as environmental performance, innovation, and resilience, and ensuring access for new entrants and smaller farms.

European farming doesn't need less support. It needs smarter, fairer, and more strategic support.

Promote innovation with impact
Showcase agriculture’s contribution to climate, community, and economy.

Public discourse often frames agriculture as a problem to be solved, a source of emissions, water pollution, or land degradation. This narrow lens obscures the sector’s role as a driver of climate solutions, rural vitality, and economic resilience. Across the global research presented in this report, innovation emerged not only as a technical tool, but as a narrative lever, one that can reframe farming as a source of progress, not pollution.

From California’s autonomous tractor retrofits to New Zealand’s nutrient efficiency strategies, farmers are adapting rapidly, often ahead of regulation. Yet these innovations rarely make headlines. That must change.

Ireland should invest in showcasing agricultural innovation with credibility and clarity. This means highlighting the co-benefits of climate-smart practices, from water quality to biodiversity to job creation, through farmer-led case studies, public demonstrations, and

targeted media engagement. The future of farming is already here in many places. It's time to tell that story more effectively.

Rebuild political influence

A united farming voice with a long-term vision is essential for renewed credibility.

Irish agriculture's political leverage has diminished, not for lack of access, but for lack of alignment. As outlined in this report, fragmentation among farm organisations has eroded the sector's ability to speak clearly and with authority. Former ministers, lobbyists, and policy advisors alike echoed this concern: when half a dozen voices compete for attention, the message gets lost and so does the influence.

In contrast, Switzerland's agricultural lobby, with near-universal farmer participation and coordinated messaging, has successfully maintained strong public support and policy relevance. Ireland must move in a similar direction. This doesn't mean suppressing internal diversity, but building consensus on long-term strategic priorities, sustainability, profitability, generational renewal, and global competitiveness.

Such unity would also strengthen Ireland's hand within EU negotiations, where clarity and consistency of position are key. Influence is not just about showing up, it's about showing up with one voice, a shared plan, and the credibility to deliver.

Prepare for 2026

Use Ireland's EU Council presidency as a strategic platform to elevate agricultural priorities.

In the second half of 2026, Ireland will assume the presidency of the Council of the European Union, a rare and valuable opportunity to shape the agenda at the highest level of EU policymaking. This moment should not be treated as ceremonial. It must be seized strategically to advance a clear, confident vision for the future of Irish and European agriculture.

As this report demonstrates, the sector faces mounting pressure, from climate obligations to global competition to shifting public expectations. The presidency offers a chance to reframe agriculture not as a policy burden, but as a cornerstone of European sustainability, food security, and rural cohesion.

Preparation must begin now. This means uniting stakeholders around core priorities, identifying policy levers within the EU framework, and building alliances with like-minded member states. A credible, future-focused agenda, rooted in environmental integrity and economic realism, can restore Ireland's influence and secure a more balanced path forward for European farming.

Angus cattle owned by Wilmont Cattle Company in NSW, Australia.

Grain silos on the farm of Kate Gunn and her brother James Davidson, NSW, Australia.

Contents

Disclaimer..... 2
Executive summary..... 3
Contents..... 9
Foreword.....10
Acknowledgments.....11
Objectives.....12
Introduction.....13
Chapter 1: The Social Licence of Farming.....15
- Deforestation and Land Use
- Water Quality
- Public Trust, Transparency, and the Future of Exports

Chapter 2: Who Controls the Narrative?.....18
- The Decline of a Unified Voice
- Media Influence and the Digital Shift
- Industry Voices and Internal Challenges
- The Need for Strategic Lobbying

Chapter 3: Lessons from Global Agriculture.....22
- Brazil – The Agricultural Goliath
- India – Scaling Up from Smallholders
- Australia – Entrepreneurial Agility and Supply Chain Foresight
- California – Innovation in the Face of Scarcity

Chapter 4: Practical Strategies for Farmers.....25
- Managing Perception: Lessons from New Zealand
- Embracing Change: The Conscious Farmers of Australia
- Strategic Thinking Under Pressure: The Dutch Derogation Debate
- Innovation at Scale: The Wilkins Model from New Zealand
- Political Unity and Public Support: The Swiss Model

Chapter 5: Transition with Integrity.....29
- Better the Devil You Know
- The Cost of Burnout
- Social Justice Under the CAP
- Controlling the Narrative: Who Should Speak for Farming?
- Mental Health Concerns
- The Legacy of Green Policy

References.....32
Plain English Compendium Summary.....35
Promotional Summary.....37

Foreword

Farming is at a crossroads. It is an industry steeped in tradition, yet facing rising pressure from environmental expectations, shifting policies, and rapidly evolving consumer demands. Despite its fundamental role in feeding populations and sustaining rural economies, the narrative around agriculture is increasingly shaped by those outside the sector, policymakers, environmental activists, media voices, and corporate stakeholders. Meanwhile, farmers themselves often struggle to be heard.

As an Agricultural Policy Advisor for the Kingdom of the Netherlands, with a background in agricultural journalism and rural affairs, I have spent years examining who truly influences how farming is perceived. My work with the Irish Independent, RTÉ, and the Irish Farmers Journal, along with the global journey of my Nuffield Scholarship, has taken me across six continents to explore the intersection of farming, policy, and public opinion. One message has remained constant: if farmers do not tell their own story, someone else will and they may not tell it fairly.

A Global Perspective on Agriculture's Story

My Nuffield journey reinforced this reality. From Brazil to New Zealand, from India to the Netherlands, I encountered a recurring theme: the disconnect between those who grow our food and those who shape the conversation around it.

- In Brazil, I saw the stark trade-offs between environmental protection and economic survival. As one policymaker told me, "Deforestation will continue as long as trees are worth more cut down than standing."
- In New Zealand, dairy leaders urged a shift from defensiveness to proactive environmental engagement - a lesson with clear relevance for Irish agriculture.
- In India, the rapid rise of dairy production made one thing clear: as Western agriculture falters, others are ready to take its place.
- And back in Europe, both Irish and Dutch farmers expressed growing frustration with top-down policy decisions that too often lack empathy for the realities of rural life.

In every case, it became clear: when farmers lose control of the narrative, they lose influence; politically, economically, and socially.

Why This Report Matters

This report seeks to answer a critical question: Who tells farming's story best? It investigates the key players shaping public perceptions, the dangers of a narrative vacuum, and how farmers can reclaim their voice, not through spin, but through leadership, transparency, and action.

The social licence of agriculture, its permission to operate, granted by public trust, is no longer guaranteed. It must be earned, defended, and communicated in a world of competing voices and shifting expectations.

With Ireland set to assume the EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2026, there is a timely opportunity to begin redefining agriculture's role, both at home and on the global stage. Although meaningful change will require sustained effort beyond Ireland's six-month tenure, initiating a united, forward-thinking strategy, led by farmers and grounded in real-world solutions, can help ensure Irish agriculture remains respected, competitive, and sustainable into the future.

This report is both a wake-up call and a roadmap. The future of farming, and its story, must be written by those who live it. The power lies with farmers, if they choose to use it.

Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and generosity of many individuals and organisations. I am deeply grateful to Nuffield Ireland for granting me the opportunity to undertake this research and for the strength of its network, which has offered inspiration, connection, and direction throughout my scholarship journey.

I extend a special thanks to my former employer, the Irish Independent, whose support and flexibility made the extensive travel element of this scholarship possible in 2024. Their commitment to thoughtful, in-depth agricultural journalism laid the foundation for my exploration of farming narratives on a global scale.

A particular thank you goes to Sam Wheeler, Sub-editor and Page Editor at the Irish Independent, for his careful and professional editing of this report. His meticulous attention to detail has greatly enhanced its clarity and readability.

To my mentor, Patrick O'Meara, I owe particular thanks for his thoughtful guidance, encouragement, and critical feedback. His steady support has been instrumental in shaping the course and clarity of this research.

I would like to sincerely thank Lorcan Allen, 2017 Nuffield Scholar, for his expert review of this report. His constructive feedback, critical insight, and deep understanding of both media and agriculture played a vital role in refining the final version.

I am especially grateful to the many farmers, policymakers, industry leaders, journalists, and researchers, in Ireland and around the world, who generously shared their time, experiences, and perspectives. Your honesty and openness challenged my thinking and enriched the insights presented in this report.

To my colleagues at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, thank you for offering a unique window into international policymaking and for deepening my understanding of global agricultural discourse.

A special mention must go to Dutch Nuffield Scholar Heleen Bruintjes, whose insight and companionship added immeasurable value to this journey.

To my fellow 2024 Nuffield Scholars: Michael Martin, John Keane, Molly Garvey, and Nick Cotter, thank you for your camaraderie, shared learning, and the many conversations that made this experience unforgettable.

To my friends and family, thank you for your constant support, patience, and encouragement through long hours of research, overseas travel, and endless redrafts. Your belief in me never wavered.

Finally, to everyone working in and for agriculture, whether in the fields, in classrooms, in boardrooms, or in policy circles, your work matters. I hope this report helps to ensure that farming's story is told truthfully, clearly, and by those who live it.

Objectives

This study investigates who shapes the public narrative of farming and how farmers can reclaim ownership of that story to rebuild influence, strengthen public trust, and ensure a sustainable, competitive future for Irish agriculture.

The core objectives of this report are to:

- **Map the key influencers** shaping agriculture's public image, including the media, policymakers, agribusiness, advocacy groups, and farmers themselves, and assess their impact on how farming is portrayed and understood.
- **Analyse the communication challenges** faced by farmers, such as political fragmentation, heightened environmental scrutiny, and the growing influence of global competitors.
- **Highlight effective farmer-led strategies** in Ireland and internationally that have successfully built public trust, enhanced transparency, and influenced policy outcomes.
- **Examine the global context**, focusing on how emerging agricultural powers are capitalising on Western challenges and what this means for Ireland's position on the world stage.
- **Deliver practical, forward-thinking recommendations** for farmers, industry stakeholders, and policymakers to build a more unified agricultural voice, restore credibility, and shape a narrative that reflects the realities of modern farming.

By addressing these objectives, this report offers a strategic roadmap for repositioning farmers at the centre of agriculture's story, where they belong.

GFP tour of an animal feed mill, Amplified Feed Solutions, in NSW, Australia.

Introduction

Agriculture is more than an economic sector, it is the backbone of rural communities and a crucial player in the fight for global sustainability. It feeds the world, shapes landscapes, supports employment, and underpins cultural identity. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the global value of agriculture rose by 89% in real terms over the past two decades, reaching $3.8 trillion in 2022 (FAO, 2024).

Yet this growth tells only part of the story. Agriculture's share of global economic output has remained stable, and its role in global employment is shrinking, from 40% of the workforce in 2000 to just 26% in 2022. At the same time, food production continues to rise, but hunger persists. In 2023, an estimated 733 million people were undernourished, 152 million more than in 2019. The burden is most heavily felt in Asia and Africa, exposing global disparities in both production and distribution.

In Ireland, agriculture plays an outsized role relative to its population. Approximately 64% of the country's 6.9 million hectares is used for farming, and 127,000 active farmers contribute to one of Europe's most productive agri-food sectors (European Commission, 2025). However, despite high productivity, incomes remain low. More importantly, its future is increasingly challenged by climate expectations, shifting societal values, and complex trade and policy environments.

A Sector Under Scrutiny

Public scrutiny of agriculture is intensifying. Concerns over emissions, land use, animal welfare, and environmental impact are shaping not just consumer behaviour but also policy decisions at national and EU levels. Farming's "social licence", the public trust granted to operate, is no longer a given. It must be earned and maintained through demonstrated responsibility, transparency, and relevance to wider societal goals.

This shift in perception is having real consequences. Policy decisions, trade agreements, funding allocations, and even export viability are now influenced as much by how farming is perceived as by how it performs.

The Role of Narrative

Public perception is not formed in a vacuum. The way farming is portrayed in the media, discussed in political circles, and understood by consumers has a powerful effect on the sector's future. Increasingly, the narrative is being shaped by external voices: journalists, environmental groups, policymakers, large agribusinesses, and consumer advocacy organisations.

Farmers often find themselves excluded from these conversations, or responding defensively, after the fact. While EU-level structures such as COPA-COGECA and Civil Dialogue Groups formally include agricultural voices in policy discussions, the growing inclusion of diverse civil society organizations over recent decades has diluted farmer representation and influence. Despite recent backtracking by the EU on flagship Green Deal measures following farmer protests, the Climate Act's binding target to cut emissions by 55% by 2030 remains intact. In this context, diminished farmer input into policy deliberations continues to raise critical questions about the fairness, feasibility, and economic consequences of the remaining regulatory agenda.

This imbalance in storytelling, between those who work the land and those who critique it, is widening the divide between agriculture and the public, particularly in urban areas where understanding of modern farming is limited.

Why This Research Matters

Given the growing influence of public opinion on agricultural outcomes, it is essential to explore who is controlling the narrative and how farmers can take back that role.

This research is driven by four core observations:

- **Declining Farmer Representation**
  A steady decrease in the number of active farmers has weakened the sector's political voice. Fragmented representation has made it difficult to advocate effectively at national or EU levels.
- **Intensifying Global Competition**
  Countries like India and Brazil are rapidly expanding their agricultural output and market reach. India's dairy sector alone is growing by 10% annually, highlighting the urgency for Irish agriculture to remain globally competitive.
- **Erosion of Public Trust**
  Without direct engagement from farmers, public perception is often shaped by those without firsthand knowledge of the sector, leading to policies that lack grounding in practical realities.
- **Opportunities for Strategic Storytelling**
  Case studies from countries like New Zealand show that farmer-led communication and strategic engagement can significantly improve public trust and influence outcomes. By contrast, reactive or confrontational tactics often backfire, reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Structure of the Report

- **Chapter 1: The Social Licence of Farming**
  Examines how environmental scrutiny, regulation, and shifting public values are reshaping agriculture's right to operate.
- **Chapter 2: Who Controls the Narrative?**
  Identifies the dominant voices influencing public perception from media and policymakers to lobbyists and multinationals.
- **Chapter 3: Lessons from Global Agriculture**
  Draws insights from Brazil, India, New Zealand, and others to illustrate how storytelling and strategy shape farming's place in society.
- **Chapter 4: Practical Strategies for Farmers**
  Offers actionable approaches for Irish farmers to reclaim their narrative, build public trust, and influence policy.
- **Chapter 5: Transition with Integrity**
  Explores how Ireland can balance environmental goals with economic and social sustainability and outlines a path forward.

By asking "Who tells farming's story best?", this report aims to do more than critique. It provides a roadmap for reclaiming the narrative, one that positions farmers as proactive, respected, and essential contributors to a sustainable future.

Chapter 1: The Social Licence of Farming

Social licence is often defined as the level of public trust granted to an industry based on its perceived social and environmental responsibilities.

Although broad public trust in Irish farmers remains strong, there's growing scrutiny over practices, particularly environmental performance and welfare, driven by rising citizen curiosity about how farming operates and how outcomes are measured.

At the 2023 Nuffield Ireland Conference, then Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Pippa Hackett, described this tension: "The social licence of food production is under unprecedented strain" despite the "invaluable role" of Irish farmers in producing food and "forming the backbone of the rural economy, as well as in the social fabric of rural areas" (Hackett, 2023).
Hackett said that without a strong agricultural sector the Irish economy would not have recovered as quickly as it did from the last recession, and "rural areas would be decimated, both socially and economically." She stressed that farmers must not only innovate to bring environmental gains alongside social and economic ones, but also communicate these changes more effectively to the public. Hackett urged attendees to listen to consumer and urban perspectives: "The road to finding common ground requires empathy, dialogue, compromise, and a commitment to truly listen to one another. The prize of finding that common ground, difficult though it will be at times, will be worth the effort: because no sector or community on its own can bear the burden or solve the challenges of the existential environmental crisis we face. We have no option but to work together."

In this climate, farming's social licence is tested across several key areas:

Deforestation and Land Use

Brazil's deforestation narrative has become central to the global agricultural debate. Speaking at the 2024 Nuffield Contemporary Scholars Conference in Campo Grande, Brazil, Governor Eduardo Riedel stated that deforestation will continue as long as trees are worth more cut down than standing (Riedel, 2024). Riedel highlighted that his state, Mato Grosso do Sul, saw a 32% growth in agricultural GDP in 2023 and has doubled its soybean output since 2009. Still, he argued that with adequate support, Brazil could increase productivity without further deforestation.
He stated that in Brazil farming is increasing on areas of forest: "This happens because the environmental assets aren't worth what they should be worth. If a tree values more on the ground than standing, probably this area will still be the frontier of agriculture."
The Governor welcomed criticism, suggesting this would help the state to improve into the future.
"I'm just arriving from Belgium from a talk with the European Union on the rules for importing produce from Brazil," he said. "By 2025, any product that is produced after 2020, due to deforestation, wouldn't be allowed… With improvements every day, I think this should improve our case. We are aiming to make the state carbon neutral by 2030 and increase agriculture because it's possible."

Water Quality

Closer to home, Irish farmers face growing scrutiny over their impact on water quality. Nuffield Scholar Aoife Feeney observed that for many farmers, the fear of not growing enough grass outweighed concerns about nutrient runoff and pollution. Drawing from her experience managing the ASSAP programme for four years on behalf of Carbery, Feeney noted that behavioural change is more effective when it's farmer-led and that collective action is critical.

"Ten farmers taking one action is far better than one farmer taking ten actions," she quoted from New Zealand's Donna Cram, adding that peer pressure was a powerful motivator for change (Feeney, 2024).

Feeney identified other driving factors such as cost, convenience, and time, citing a reduction in the use of chemical fertilisers by Irish farmers due to high prices in recent years. "I don't think enough urgency was put on the need for action a couple of years back when it should have been. The industry, in general, didn't want to scaremonger farmers because they were being hit by so many other things like carbon emissions," Feeney said. "At the end of the day, when we don't explain the policy clearly, and we don't give farmers the facts, then they can't make the decision."

Public Trust, Transparency, and the Future of Exports

Public confidence in agriculture also hinges on transparency and communication. The Japanese example illustrates how loose timelines and soft policies can backfire. Journalist at The Japan Agricultural News, Masaru Yamada criticised Japan's Green Food System Strategy for lacking clear obligations. He points to the Japanese children's animation Doraemon, in which a robotic cat uses futuristic gadgets to quickly solve everyday problems. However, these technological fixes frequently create unintended, and often problematic, consequences. Through this analogy, Yamada (2023) highlights the pitfalls of "technological solutionism," cautioning against overreliance on technology as a simple fix for complex issues, without adequate consideration of their broader impacts. He described it as "greenwashing," where governments signal action without requiring change.

Japan's "Green Food System Strategy", also known as "Strategy MIDORI", was introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) in May 2021. This plan aims to enhance agricultural productivity while promoting environmental sustainability through innovation. Key objectives by 2050 include carbon neutrality in agriculture, cutting the use of chemical fertilisers by 30% and reducing the use of chemical pesticides by 50% and expansion of organic farming to 25% of Japan's farmland.

Yamada said: "Japan's strategy is very ambitious but there is no need to change significantly in the short term and it is very slow pace. Our government policy is very vague, whereas the Farm to Fork Strategy is very strict and enforces farmers to do the tasks or they won't get their subsidies. The Japanese government isn't asking its farmers to change their farming style. They simply say that we have to change in the future to be more environmentally friendly and I think that is a kind of a greenwash."

Ireland has committed to a 25% emissions reduction in agriculture by 2030, but currently available and proven mitigation measures are estimated to only achieve about 20%. This discrepancy between ambition and feasibility contributes to public doubt and policy pressure.

A growing dimension to the public scrutiny of Irish agriculture is the treatment of live animal exports. In response to increasing criticism, a senior stakeholder from the Dutch veal industry, speaking anonymously in a private conversation, recently urged Ireland to proactively develop its own veal sector, seeing it as a way to address concerns about animal

welfare linked to live exports. Citing the 130,000 calves exported to the Netherlands each year, the expert argued that Ireland must create domestic infrastructure to process calves into high-value veal products. Doing so would not only improve animal welfare outcomes but also secure economic value and social acceptance for the sector (Dutch Insider, 2024).
The Dutch veal expert recommends Ireland to produce 8-12-month calves for rose veal and to compete with the Netherlands and the rest of Europe. “There is demand for this high-value type of meat in for example Spain and Portugal, but actually almost all over Europe. Italy is developing more and more and Ireland has to invest.” The source said leading players in Irish agribusiness should take the lead in such a project and cited entities such as ABP and Kerry as being ideally placed to establish a successful business. “Around 200,000 dairy calves are exported from Ireland each year. That’s a wonderful size to start a company on. The two largest Dutch veal plants are each slaughtering around 400,000 calves per year, but certainly a standalone plant can break even at 200,000 calves.”

CONCLUSION: AGRICULTURE’S SOCIAL LICENCE IS NO LONGER AN AUTOMATIC PRIVILEGE; IT MUST BE ACTIVELY EARNED AND CONTINUOUSLY REAFFIRMED. THIS REQUIRES INNOVATION, GENUINE ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITMENT, AND CLEAR, CREDIBLE COMMUNICATION FROM WITHIN THE FARMING SECTOR. AS THIS CHAPTER DEMONSTRATES, EFFORTS TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN PUBLIC EXPECTATION AND FARMING REALITIES ARE UNDERWAY, BUT GREATER ALIGNMENT IS NEEDED TO SECURE FARMING’S PLACE IN A CHANGING WORLD.

A goat eating leaves off an argan tree in Morocco, Africa.

Chapter 2: Who controls the narrative?

In any industry, narratives are shaped by those who have the most influence, and the greatest access to the platforms of communication. For agriculture, the challenge is not simply one of producing food, but of ensuring that the story of how that food is produced is told fairly, accurately, and authentically. The farming sector, long reliant on traditional modes of influence, now finds itself contending with a fragmented lobby, evolving political dynamics, and a media environment driven by algorithms and polarised discourse.

The Decline of a Unified Voice

Over the past several decades, the influence of the Irish farming lobby has diminished. Once a central force in Irish politics, the agricultural sector now finds itself struggling to speak with a unified voice (Politics feature for Independent.ie, 2024). Many former Agriculture Ministers point to the fracturing of farm organisations as a key cause. With numerous groups such as the IFA, ICMSA, ICSA, and INHFA representing sometimes competing interests, clarity of message and impact has been diluted.

In terms of lobbying organisations, IFA is second only to IBEC (the business federation). Irish Independent political writer John Downing, who reported from Brussels in the ’90s, has seen “intense change” with Ireland’s accession to the EEC. “The IFA response was impressive: people like John Donnelly and Tom Parlon fought hard to manage this change and protect farmers’ interests,” he says. “The Irish farm lobby was effective and sometimes even feared. But the continued fall-off in farm numbers, the discouraging older age structure of those involved and the lack of unity of purpose among a plethora of farmer organisations now representing the industry, are among the things mitigating against effective farming lobbying. I sense that the Irish farm lobby’s ‘political punch’ is somewhat diminished, but the farmer and rural vote still counts, politicians all know they can ignore the farmers at their peril.”

Many political commentators point to the fragmentation of the farm lobby as a source of ground being lost in recent times.

“You’ve got to ask yourself, when the phone rings in the Taoiseach’s office, whose call will they take? If there’s one or two farm leaders, it’s more likely to have an impact than if there’s half a dozen of them,” says former Agriculture Minister (1994-97) Ivan Yates. “Back in the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s, the government of the day was half afraid of farmers. But now if there’s a big protest, the news angle is traffic disruption for the people in Dublin. There’s now no fear factor for politicians. That isn’t to say that rural TDs aren’t attuned to the particular problems and needs of farmers. But there is an element whereby the main party leaders, since Bertie Ahern’s time, have all really little or no connection with Rural Ireland, let alone with farmers.”

Simon Coveney, his fellow former Agriculture Minister (2011-16), agrees on the importance of a united farm lobby. “The more fragmented the representation, generally the less clarity there is on message. If you have too many organisations expending energy competing with each other, then that results sometimes in a loss of focus,” he says. “The more unified the farming lobby, the more impactful at a European, national and local level. There’s no doubt that in the last 10 years we’ve seen something of a fragmentation. The dominance of the IFA

is still a factor. It's still by far the largest organisation, but it's not as comprehensive perhaps as it once was, in terms of being seen as the voice of farm families across the country. There are some issues that I think are very difficult for one farming lobby to deal with. For example how the Single Farm Payment is dispersed in the context of a move towards a standard payment per hectare for everybody in the context of convergence."

Coveney acknowledges that this remains quite a divisive issue for a lot of farmers. "The other issue for the IFA, quite some time ago now, was the internal challenge to the leadership and the ending of a president's term on the back of internal division and the deliberate undermining of leadership," he continues. "That created division amongst members of the IFA which I think was very damaging at the time. While I think the IFA has recovered somewhat from that, it was certainly a damaging period because the association's motto is unity, strength, and delivery. If the unity element isn't there it undermines the other two as well."

Former Minister for Agriculture Michael Creed reflected on a time when a few key players represented the majority of Irish farmers, lending coherence and strength to negotiations. Today, he warns, "the competition is more between farm organisations than it is for farmers," a trend that has accelerated the erosion of political influence."There's always friction between the dairy and beef sides so maybe the problem is someone needs to step back from the coal face and look at what the collective interest of Irish farmers is and take a 10-year horizon and articulate a coherent strategy. I don't see evidence for that strategy, and you have to factor in politics at European level, global issues such as climate change, and you have to see where farming fits into all of that and how it can diminish the fracturing of its leverage to achieve the best result. It's a difficult task when you have that multitude of farm organisations very often competing between themselves."

This sentiment was echoed by Taoiseach Micheál Martin, who criticised a "complete lack of empathy" for farmers in some corners of the Dáil. Martin's remarks highlighted a growing urban-rural divide and an increasing detachment from the issues facing modern agriculture, particularly around the Nitrates Derogation and farm succession (Martin, 2024).

A recent example is the Social Democrats' 2024 election manifesto, which proposed scrapping the Nitrates Derogation entirely, a move that has alarmed many in the farming community who see it as out of step with the realities of agricultural life

Media Influence and the Digital Shift

The evolution of media has further complicated farming's ability to control its narrative. Peter Vandermeersch, CEO of Mediahuis Ireland, which owns the Irish Independent, acknowledged that digital platforms like Google, Meta, and TikTok now dominate the distribution of information. Audiences have migrated online, often consuming content via social platforms rather than traditional outlets. This shift has undermined the editorial filtering process that once ensured accuracy and balance in public discourse (Vandermeersch, 2023).

Vandermeersch warns that: "Our worst competitors are those who spread fake news, who produce misinformation, who launch conspiracy theories. Some of the misinformation is uploaded by the hundreds of millions of individuals using social platforms, much of it is

uploaded in a systematic way by organisations and even governments. These actors are weaponizing misinformation to undermine democracy."

As Vandermeersch explains, "Every 'influencer' with an Instagram, YouTube or TikTok account can produce 'content'," resulting in an environment where misinformation can be disseminated as easily as facts. For agriculture, this means that hostile narratives about emissions, animal welfare, or land use can quickly take root in public consciousness, often without nuance or factual context."

Industry Voices and Internal Challenges

Former Glanbia CEO Siobhán Talbot has reflected on the challenge of balancing long-term strategy with short-term pressures in the dairy industry. Speaking at the 2024 Nuffield Ireland Conference, she suggested that the sector has historically focused too much on the "short game" of milk pricing at the expense of broader strategic goals. "Part of my job at times was to bring people with me, but not hostage the ultimate success of the organisation by overplaying one or the other," she said. Talbot emphasised the importance of long-term vision in navigating complex market and political pressures, a mindset that is increasingly needed across Irish agriculture (Talbot, 2024).

Former Tirlán CEO Jim Bergin echoed the concerns around external threats to the sector's image, warning that "people outside of farming want to devastate the dairy herd". Launching the co-op's 'Farming for Water' project, Bergin reaffirmed his support for the sector: "I will defend farming on my back." His remarks underscore the perception that farming is under siege in public discourse and must actively defend its record (Bergin, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Environmental Protection Agency's now-deleted tweet proposing that reducing red meat intake would make one "healthier, wealthier and more fabulous" illustrates the tension between state agencies and the farming community. Internal emails later revealed that EPA officials were aware the post might provoke backlash, but proceeded nonetheless. The tweet was removed following complaints from industry bodies, with the EPA acknowledging it had crossed a line and promising a more "considered debate" in future communications (EPA, 2023).

Many former and current industry leaders agree that the agricultural sector has become too reactive. IFA President Francie Gorman warned that the corporate and semi-state world is afraid to defend farmers, for fear of being labelled climate change deniers. He also noted that while farmers have made significant investments in environmental protection, these efforts are seldom recognised publicly. "We have the third or fourth best groundwater quality in Europe and you never hear that," Gorman remarked (Gorman, 2024).

This lack of proactive communication, he argues, contributes to a skewed public image of farming, one that fails to reflect its contribution to sustainability, food security, and rural life. According to Gorman, Ireland's farming message must be coordinated and delivered with confidence: "We do a great job and we're great at it."

The Need for Strategic Lobbying

Despite declining numbers, with farming now accounting for just 4% of the Irish workforce, agriculture remains one of the most lobbied policy areas in the country. But access alone is not enough. As attorney and agricultural lobbyist, George Soares, in California points out, effectiveness lies in unity, clarity, and relationship-building (Soares, 2024).

In California, Soares lamented that agriculture had allowed itself to be “typecast,” failing to connect its concerns to broader community needs. “We should have been talking about communities. Agriculture is part of this community,” he said, stressing the importance of building coalitions and maintaining strong lines of communication with lawmakers (Soares, 2024).

“I'm at Disneyland a couple of years ago to give a speech to a group, and I had time before the speech, so I hadn't been to Disneyland for a while, so I walked down Disney street, or whatever that is. To get to that street, you have to go through security. But when I'm traveling around, before I have to put on these suits, I have jeans and boots on, I kind of look like a cowboy or a farmer, and so I'm going through security, and a guy there who's checking something, says, you're a farmer, aren't you? And I kind of smiled to myself, saying, uh huh, he recognizes I'm a farmer and maybe there's going to be a compliment associated with this. He looked at me, and he only said one thing to me, ‘it sure takes a lot of water to grow an almond, doesn't it?’ Some years before the almond industry became the poster child of wasting water. Now, the almond people don't use any more water than the walnut people, the pistachio people, but they got tagged with that. There's 8 million people who live in the Disneyland area down in Southern California. Some guy, a security guy, sees a guy who looks like a farmer, and the first thing that came to his mind was farmers waste water.”

“I give that example in speeches to make the point of how we have really lost opportunity with the general public, and how they perceive us. So I may have five lobbyists in the capital every day, but we're dealing with people that just don't understand this, and farmers say shame on them and I'm saying increasingly shame on us. We need to be better at telling our story.”

CONCLUSION: THE BATTLE TO CONTROL THE AGRICULTURAL NARRATIVE IS NOT ABOUT SHOUTING THE LOUDEST, BUT ABOUT BEING CLEAR, CREDIBLE, AND CONSISTENT. FRAGMENTATION HAS DILUTED FARMING'S INFLUENCE JUST AS THE ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA HAS BECOME CENTRAL TO NATIONAL POLITICS. WITHOUT A COORDINATED, PROACTIVE APPROACH, THE STORY OF IRISH FARMING WILL CONTINUE TO BE TOLD BY OTHERS, OFTEN INACCURATELY.

IN AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL AND DIVIDED WORLD, FARMERS MUST NOT ONLY PRODUCE FOOD SUSTAINABLY, BUT ALSO ADVOCATE STRATEGICALLY, COMMUNICATE CLEARLY, AND UNIFY THEIR VOICE. OTHERWISE, AS SOARES NOTED, “UNLESS YOU TELL YOUR OWN STORY, SOMEONE ELSE IS GOING TO COME AND TELL YOUR STORY, AND THEY’RE GOING TO TELL IT THE WRONG WAY.”

Chapter 3: Lessons from Global Agriculture

Brazil – The Agricultural Goliath

Brazil's agri-business sector is colossal, with a landmass more than 100 times the size of Ireland and agricultural output worth almost four times Ireland's entire GDP. Agribusiness contributes between 25–30% to Brazil's nearly €2 trillion GDP. The country is the world's top exporter of beef, poultry, soybean, maize, sugar, and orange juice. Just over 30% of Brazil's 2.1 billion acres are used for agriculture, compared to 64% of Ireland's 20.88 million acres.

Brazil's environmental challenges have attracted global attention. JBS, the world's largest beef and poultry processor, claims to monitor over 73,460 farms daily to ensure no deforestation, slave-like labour, or farming in conservation areas.

Yet the company is facing legal scrutiny, including a lawsuit by New York State for allegedly misleading the public about its environmental impact. JBS Brazil Climate Action leader Sheila Guebara emphasised the company's sustainability-first approach: "Sustainability is not part of the strategy but is the strategy" (Guebara, 2024).

During a Nuffield Contemporary Scholars Conference visit, scholars toured the JBS facility in Campo Grande, which had recently received approval to export to China. With a slaughter capacity of 3,000 animals per day, the facility showcases Brazil's immense meat processing infrastructure.

Brazilian rancher Roberto Coelho operates Fazenda San Francisco in the Pantanal, a unique farm spread over 8,970 hectares, with 43% preserved forest, 30% rice fields, and 25% pasture. He breeds crossbred 'droughtmaster' cattle that withstand the region's extreme heat and drought. His farm practises rotational grazing and includes feedlot finishing, yet despite scale, profit margins remain tight, just €29 per hectare. Coelho also rejected carbon farming contracts requiring 40-year commitments and revenue shares with brokers, stating: "I'm like a prisoner, they control the sale" (Coelho, 2024).

The Pantanal is one of the world's largest tropical wetlands and is home to endangered jaguars. Coelho has balanced agri-tourism with conservation, generating 20% profit margins from hosting 34 guests daily, who are warned not to stray far due to jaguar activity. "In the beginning, we killed lots of jaguars," he admits. "Now we have reached the balance."

A *fazenda* is a plantation found throughout Brazil during the colonial period, 16th-18th centuries, but nowadays, *fazenda* denotes any kind of farm in Brazilian Portuguese.
In the past, *fazendas* created a huge quantity of commodities for Brazilian trade, but also led to intensification of slavery.

More than 1.4 million Africans were forced into slavery in Brazil in the last 50 years of the trade, and even after the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended, slavery continued in the country until 1888, when it was abolished.

India – Scaling Up from Smallholders

India is positioning itself to capitalise on a potential Western retreat from dairy production. With 150 million people working in agriculture and 4 million suppliers across 18,000 villages, the Amul cooperative leads the charge. Head of Dudhmansagar Dairy [part of Amul group], Prateek Kumar Mudgal, announced a 10% annual expansion in milk production: “If other countries have issues with their cattle and milk production, it’s good for us, markets open for us.” (Kumar Mudgal, 2024).

Amul pays farmers every 10 days and retains only 5% of profits for expansion. With 32 million litres of daily processing capacity and 90% of produce sold domestically, price fluctuations are rare. The co-op is also exploring carbon credits and methane reduction, despite relying largely on smallholder production.

Meanwhile, private companies like Parag Milk Foods are introducing industrial-scale operations. Its new 15,000-cow mega-farm, supported by a 3,500-cow farm in Pune, focuses on premium direct-to-consumer delivery. The farm, 'Bhagyalakshmi', employs European experts and produces 8,500L annually per cow. With milk sold at €1.34/L and ghee (clarified butter) at €23.47/kg, the company caters to India’s elite, including billionaire Mukesh Ambani (Bhagyalakshmi, 2024).

Challenges remain: vaccine availability is limited, and foot-and-mouth disease circulates freely in nearby livestock. The company circumvents a national cattle import ban by relying on semen and embryo imports, using sexed semen to expand its herd.

Australia – Entrepreneurial Agility and Supply Chain Foresight

Australian dairy farmer Peter Notman manages two farms 1,300km apart, with milk shipped 16 hours daily to Brisbane. Notman anticipated Queensland’s milk shortage and capitalised on it by building a milking operation from scratch. His second farm, set up in under six months, now delivers over 20,000 litres of milk daily under a three-year fixed-price contract worth €0.52/L (Notman, 2024).

Victorian milk prices are falling, but Notman’s model allows him to secure better income through logistical resilience and consistent supply. His strategy includes tightly controlled calving blocks, investment in infrastructure like diesel heaters to combat freezing conditions, and sourcing skilled labour from abroad. Notman’s experience reflects the advantages of forward planning and market intelligence. It also highlights the challenges of remote farming: “We’re dairy farmers/dairy technicians now,” he jokes, noting the self-reliance required in isolated settings.

California – Innovation in the Face of Scarcity

Mechanical engineer Connor Kingman founded Kingman Ag to address labour shortages in California agriculture. His technology retrofits existing tractors with autonomous driving capabilities, enabling them to operate independently using GPS-based navigation. The retrofit system, which costs around $20,000, allows tractors to run continuously. “We’re cutting tens of thousands of dollars per year in labour costs off small farmers,” Kingman explains. “It allows us to keep farming in California under strict environmental laws” (Kingman, 2024).

Kingman's technology is especially popular among organic farmers seeking alternatives to chemical weed control. His system's upcoming version will cater to tree crops like almonds and apples, using AI rather than GPS to navigate orchards. Yet California's water politics present a greater existential threat. Kingman warns that environmental decisions, such as restricting aquifer use to protect endangered fish, could take thousands of hectares out of production. "Give us the water out of Sacramento or food prices are going to go up," he says. "It's a human-made problem."

His farm partners, the Sheely family, grow cotton, tomatoes, pistachios, onions, and wheat, often rotating crops for sustainability rather than profit. "There's no bigger advocate for sustainability than farmers," Kingman says.

CONCLUSION: THE GLOBAL CASE STUDIES EXPLORED IN THIS CHAPTER UNDERLINE THE DIVERSITY OF APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES IN AGRICULTURE. BRAZIL, WITH ITS SCALE AND GLOBAL REACH, MUST BALANCE ENVIRONMENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY WITH ECONOMIC AMBITION. INDIA SHOWCASES THE POWER OF COOPERATIVES AND DECENTRALISED SYSTEMS. AUSTRALIA DEMONSTRATES HOW AGILITY AND FORWARD CONTRACTS CAN BUFFER AGAINST MARKET SHOCKS. AND CALIFORNIA PROVES THAT INNOVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION CAN CO-EXIST, ALBEIT NOT WITHOUT FRICTION.

EACH REGION BRINGS LESSONS FOR IRELAND. WHETHER IT'S INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY INTO STRATEGY, AS JBS CLAIMS; EMPOWERING SMALLHOLDERS, LIKE AMUL; ANTICIPATING MARKET GAPS, LIKE NOTMAN; OR DEPLOYING DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGY, LIKE KINGMAN AG, IRISH AGRICULTURE CAN DRAW FROM THESE GLOBAL EXAMPLES TO REMAIN RESILIENT, SUSTAINABLE, AND GLOBALLY RELEVANT.

Mechanical engineer Connor Kingman with one of his autonomous tractors in California, USA.

Chapter 4: Practical strategies for farmers

In the face of mounting environmental pressures, evolving consumer expectations, and a fast-changing political landscape, farmers across the globe are developing innovative strategies to future-proof their businesses. From high-tech automation to low-intensity rewilding, the examples in this chapter show that practical, adaptive approaches can maintain profitability while addressing environmental concerns and fostering public trust.

Managing Perception: Lessons from New Zealand

New Zealand dairy farmer and DairyNZ director Cameron Henderson urges farmers not to engage with anti-farming activists directly. “Going to war with these people is just not a good idea. It makes you look defensive,” he says. Henderson, who is also a Nuffield Scholar, recommends measured responses and behind-the-scenes work on environmental issues before they escalate publicly (Henderson, 2024). Henderson milks over 700 cows on 215ha near Oxford, Canterbury, and leases an additional 200ha. He installed a third party-owned 50kW solar farm that provides him with cheap power and a steady income. “It’s actually the most profitable part of the farm,” he says.

Having served as provincial president for Federated Farmers, he’s seen how unconstructive confrontation can be. He notes that engaging with inflammatory media only amplifies the message due to social media algorithms. “The worst thing you can do is engage with it.” He says that DairyNZ has had a change of strategy to try and be more proactive. “While we may not advertise that bobby calves are a big issue and we need to do something about it, we quietly work on solutions in the background so if it ever does become a big issue, we have options there and we are not really reactive.”

Henderson says he learnt early on not to respond to anything he disagrees with “because it gives it air time”. “What we’ve seen in the past is there’d be an article that would come out, basically saying dairy farmers are the source of all evil, and because that triggers farmers they’ll all click on it and read it. This pushes it up the priority charts and on social media because it’s getting all of these clicks. It’s actually farmers who mostly do it and put it higher up in everyone else’s feed. Our advice is basically, don’t engage with it and don’t give it any attention at all. The algorithm and the way that media gets shared these days will de-prioritise it and it’ll disappear quicker. The worst thing you can do is engage with it. We might put a message out that counteracts it, but not particularly linked to that person or organisation.”

Henderson believes that incentives, rather than mandates, will drive real change. Fonterra, New Zealand’s dairy co-op, has introduced differential payments based on environmental performance. “It’s a small gap now, but as it widens, it will really change behaviour.”

Embracing Change: The Conscious Farmers of Australia

Australian graziers Derek and Kirrily Blomfield manage 1,000ha near Tamworth, New South Wales. They transitioned away from intensive livestock farming to run a chemical-free system and sell beef and lamb directly to consumers via their website, branding themselves ‘The Conscious Farmer’ (Blomfield, 2024).

“We have a very complacent consumer market,” Derek says. “People don’t even go in [to shops] anymore. They just back up to the door and it gets put in your boot.” Kirrily is passionate about supporting small family businesses and believes consumers can do much more to help their local economies. “Australians are whining about the power of the big two supermarkets, that pricing isn’t fair, but they still keep going there,” she says. “We have a couple of fruit and veg shops here in Tamworth and if every person spent an extra $30 there instead of the supermarket, it would make a massive change for that small family business. When we started we weren’t looking at what price other people were selling directly for. We just said we’d like double the price of what we’re getting now and that’s how we set our prices.”

The Blomfields stopped using social media due to concerns over data privacy and maintained customer contact through newsletters. Their meat comes from animals raised on biologically managed pastures without chemical inputs.

Derek adds, “If you’re growing something, and you’re not prepared to eat it, what are you doing?” Their switch began with discontent: “We would come home smelling of chemicals... I just hated what we were doing.” Now they’re content selling quality food from low-intensity systems, confident in their ethical and ecological foundations.

Strategic Thinking Under Pressure: The Dutch Derogation Debate

Dutch dairy farmer Rudi de Wilde milks 120 cows and exports 1,500m³ of manure annually, at a staggering cost of €48,000. With the Netherlands’ Nitrates Derogation ending in 2025, many farmers are quitting, but de Wilde sees this as an opportunity (de Wilde, 2024). “The trend in the Netherlands is that there are many farms finishing up because there are no new farmers to take over from their parents. All the rules and the high cost are part of the reason why a lot of farmers quit,” he says. “This means there may be space for me to go further.”

The European Commission agreed to phase out the Dutch Nitrates Derogation over a transitional period, 2023-2025, to allow farmers time to adjust. When the Derogation ends entirely, Dutch farmers will have to adhere to the standard EU limit of 170kg N/ha. This year the Netherlands has had a maximum stocking rate of 210kg N/ha in “nutrient-polluted areas” and 230kg N/ha in “other” areas.

“In the Netherlands, they say there is a little problem with water quality, so that’s the reason why we are losing the Derogation now,” de Wilde says. “The way we farm now, with the injection of the manure, a small amount of fertiliser is all taken by our grass, so I don’t think we lose a lot of nitrogen into the groundwater. But there are different opinions about that story. We have a lot of big cities and the water under the big cities is terrible. Here, in this neighbourhood, we have an area where they use the groundwater for drinking water. It is in an area with a lot of dairy farmers, and the company says the water is good quality, and they don’t have a lot of work to make it pure. We asked why they don’t take the water under the cities and they say the water is terrible, filthy.”

De Wilde uses robotic milking and solar panels to future-proof his operation and reduce labour dependency. He also runs a small beef business, selling meat directly to local customers. “Everyone is welcome here. We have nothing to hide.”

He recalls joining protests in 2019 against government proposals to reduce cow numbers, describing the policies as driven by public opinion, not facts. “The main reason for the protest was the government’s proposal to reduce cows. At that time our government was making rules on what I say was not based on facts but instead on public opinion. There was one politician who was saying we need to reduce cow numbers, and we then took our tractors to the streets and highways and drove to The Hague. That was six or seven hours driving from my farm to the city. It was fun to do with our tractors and all of the farmers. Our target was to stop that way of thinking in the government because there was no good reason for them to think like that. I think it had an impact but from 2019 until now, almost nothing has changed. There are still the same problems. Now the Derogation is lost.”

Innovation at Scale: The Wilkins Model from New Zealand

Nuffield Scholar Steve Wilkins farms 8,000ha across tillage, dairy, sheep, beef, and deer enterprises in Southland. He manages 3,500 dairy cows and believes agriculture should be proactive: “The industry needs to have the answers before the questions are asked.” (Wilkins, 2024).

He’s also vice-chair of the Foundation for Arable Research and has studied nutrient cycles and cropping strategies to improve sustainability. Wilkins emphasises the importance of farmer-to-farmer learning: “Farmers learn off other farmers. If they see something that works, they’ll do it.” He is critical of simplistic solutions: “A lot of people are wildly against glyphosate, but they don’t understand the alternatives are often worse.”

Wilkins points to regional differences in nutrient issues, nitrogen in Canterbury, phosphate in Southland, and the need for localised solutions. “Winter grazing cows in mud isn’t a good look anymore.” He advocates for practical demonstrations and financial arguments: “Show farmers that using nitrogen more efficiently saves money, and they’ll do it.”

Political Unity and Public Support: The Swiss Model

Switzerland’s system of direct democracy and strong farm lobby has helped maintain public support for agriculture. In 2023, 63% of voters rejected a biodiversity referendum, showing confidence in current agri-environmental measures (McCormack, C).

Unlike the individualised farm lobby structure in Ireland, the Swiss Farmers’ Union is an umbrella organisation representing 25 farmer associations and 60 technical organisations, boasting a membership of almost all 48,000 farms in the country. As such, the Swiss agricultural sector can effectively speak as one collective voice.

Fritz Glauser, vice-president of the Swiss Farmers’ Union, says, “Swiss people are on our side.” Farmers meet strict requirements, 7% of land for biodiversity, nutrient balance, animal welfare, in exchange for income support. “Our farm lobby is very strong,” he says. “We bring schools onto farms and go into cities with farmer markets. We answer questions and explain what we do.”

Christian Hofer, Director-General of the Federal Office for Agriculture, notes that Swiss farmers receive €2.9bn annually in return for delivering public goods. About 90% of Swiss agricultural land participates in the direct payment system. “This is our work that is never

finished," Glauser says. "It's getting harder to keep people connected to agriculture, but we must try."

CONCLUSION: WHAT UNITES THESE EXAMPLES IS A WILLINGNESS TO ADAPT, TO ENGAGE, AND TO SEE FARMING NOT JUST AS A LIVELIHOOD, BUT AS A RESPONSIBILITY TO THE LAND AND SOCIETY.

Men offloading maize silage on a dairy farm just outside of New Delhi, India.

Women packing bags of milk at Dudhmansagar Dairy in India.

Chapter 5: Transition with Integrity

Better the Devil You Know

The following is an opinion piece I wrote for the Irish Farmers Journal, offering a personal perspective on the trade-offs between farming under the EU's regulatory and subsidy framework and a free-market alternative (Hurson, 2025).

"If you think Irish farming is over-regulated and too reliant on subsidies, be careful what you wish for. That's not to dismiss these concerns, farmers across Europe share them, as demonstrated by protests such as the IFA's 'Enough is Enough' campaign. The reality, though, is that Europe has positioned itself as a leader in environmental policy, and we shouldn't expect this standard to be dropped any time soon. What we can demand, however, are better-structured supports that reflect the social good provided by farms across rural Ireland. There are farmers overseas who operate largely without subsidies, a model that comes with its own serious challenges. Let me remind you of the *seanfhocail: Is glas iad na cnoic i bhfad uainn ach más glas, ní féarach* (far away hills are greener, but not necessarily grassier).

"This came to mind last June in New South Wales, Australia, where I spent a week visiting farms as part of a group of international Nuffield scholars. Australia is home to incredible farmers who are highly skilled, committed to productivity and willing to take huge financial risks. Many prioritise environmental stewardship and deeply care about the quality of their products. But the stark reality of operating in this unforgiving market system is eye-opening. Take, for example, a farmer growing crops he wouldn't feed to his own child due to the sheer amount of herbicide used in production. No farmer should have to produce food they wouldn't confidently eat themselves. Yet in a system where survival hinges on profit margins, ethical choices can be forced to take a back seat to economic pressures. During another visit, I met farmers who were eagerly awaiting the financial downfall of their neighbours so they could buy up their land and expand. These are inherently good people, but this kind of sentiment is the product of an unfettered capitalist system where social safeguards are minimal, and survival is cut-throat.

"While writing this piece I consulted with Nuffield scholars in Australia, and they pushed back on my suggestion that they operate under a more laissez-faire regulatory environment. They argued that, to compete in global markets, they must increasingly meet the same standards imposed on Irish farmers, but without the safety net of financial supports. Meanwhile, the European model, where subsidies come with strict regulations, is often criticised for stifling productivity and innovation. This is hard to dispute. Farmers in Ireland tend to be more cautious about experimenting with new methods, and Teagasc's annual National Farm Survey consistently highlights the financial struggles many farms face.

"However, what Ireland does have is an incredible social network, something sorely lacking in parts of rural Australia. What we need is a balanced approach; regulations that protect the environment, financial supports that sustain rural communities and the flexibility to innovate so Irish farmers remain competitive on the global stage. It's fair to argue that Europe's regulations are complex and that subsidies are losing their value. But as one of my Australian friends pointed out, the devil you know is often better than the devil you don't. I'm not blind to

the flaws in the current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but I believe regulation is the price we pay for subsidies, and those subsidies help keep rural Ireland vibrant. What we need is functional regulation and well-structured supports that protect and enhance the good work Irish farmers do every day. So, if I had to choose between Europe's CAP or the wide-open plains of New South Wales, you'd still find me on a drumlin in Smithborough, Co Monaghan."

Social Justice Under the CAP

Prof Lee-Ann Sutherland from the James Hutton Institute in Scotland criticises how EU subsidies disproportionately benefit older, white male landowners and corporations. In contrast, the migrant labour force, racially and ethnically diverse, remains underpaid and over-exploited (Sutherland, 2023).

"The overwhelming whiteness of European farmers remains undocumented and unchallenged," she writes. "In supporting existing farm structures, EU subsidies reinforce huge gender imbalances." Prof Sutherland also challenges the idea that there's a shortage of young people interested in farming. Instead, many aspiring farmers can't access land or capital. New entrants, regardless of age, tend to be more innovative than established farmers or their successors.

Controlling the Narrative: Who Should Speak for Farming?

Bord Bia's newly launched Our Food Connects aims to align major farm organisations and agribusiness stakeholders to proactively address declining public understanding and trust in farming. With backing from ICMSA, IFA, UCD, and processors like ABP and Dawn Meats, the initiative is forming a new business entity with an annual programme of work spanning communications, advocacy development, and education (Bord Bia, 2024). Its stated goals include improving public understanding, tackling issues like calf welfare, and investing in education. A small, expert team will manage the initiative, supported by an interim board including representatives from farming bodies, academia, and industry.

The core aim is to educate and inform the public using evidence-based facts, share compelling stories, and foster deeper engagement, with a particular focus on audiences outside the farming community. According to Bord Bia, the overarching goal is to maintain Irish agriculture's licence to operate by building greater public understanding, trust, and support for the sector.

But this centralisation has its critics. Journalist and farmer Darragh McCullough argues that controlling the narrative is the wrong approach. "If your narrative is a bad one, it will still stink no matter how nicely you tell everyone it smells," he says (McCullough, 2024).

McCullough believes that real change comes from farmers themselves, not PR firms: "The beauty of modern media is that every farmer can craft their own narrative. It doesn't matter whether it's YouTube, X, or Facebook. It's not RTÉ or anyone else that controls access to the public airwaves anymore. This is the flip side of the fragmentation of media and representation. Animal welfare campaigners get it, and I think most farmers instinctively understand it now too. So, what will spending millions on controlling farming's narrative

achieve? Little other than clouding the real issues and sowing seeds of suspicion… and making some PR chaps very wealthy."

McCullough's critique underscores the risk that top-down, overly centralised campaigns may be perceived as inauthentic or agenda-driven, especially if not grounded in visible farmer leadership and transparency.

Mental Health Concerns

EU Agriculture Commissioner Christophe Hansen has also voiced concern about the mental health crisis in farming, linking depression and suicide to climate-related stress, red tape, and a lack of public appreciation (Hansen, 2024).

"Farming can be lonely," he told the European Parliament. "Suicide rates in some member states are 20% higher among farmers. Fatal accidents are more than double the rate of other sectors." He stressed the need for national and local governments to act, with targeted mental health initiatives and fewer bureaucratic burdens.

Research from DCU reveals that over 25% of Irish farmers experience burnout, and more than 60% sleep less than seven hours a night. Dr Siobhán O'Connor warns that burnout and poor sleep increase the risk of mental and physical health issues, and accidents on farms. "Burnout farmers displayed higher mental and physical health issues," she explains. "They make quick and poor judgments, and it impacts their quality of life and family relationships." (O'Connor, 2023)

Older farmers and those with children were more likely to experience burnout, particularly if incomes were low. Targeted interventions, financial supports, and accessible mental health resources are urgently needed. Anna Donnla O'Hagan, a project researcher, points out how difficult it is for farmers to take a break: "They have a lifestyle, not just a job. It's hard to step away. The lines between work and life are blurred."

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF FARMING MUST STRIKE A DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY, ECONOMIC VIABILITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE. THIS CHAPTER HAS HIGHLIGHTED THE MENTAL HEALTH TOLL ON FARMERS, THE SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES EMBEDDED IN CURRENT SUPPORT MODELS, AND THE GROWING DIVIDE BETWEEN THOSE WHO CRAFT NARRATIVES AND THOSE WHO LIVE THEM.

WHAT IRISH AGRICULTURE NEEDS NOW IS NOT A FAÇADE OF UNITY OR A POLISHED IMAGE, IT NEEDS PRACTICAL, TRANSPARENT POLICIES THAT UPHOLD THE DIGNITY OF FARMERS, ENSURE FAIR ACCESS FOR ALL, AND BUILD RESILIENCE FOR GENERATIONS TO COME.

References

FAO. (2024). FAO Statistical Yearbook 2024 reveals critical insights on the sustainability of agriculture, food security, and the importance of agrifood in employment. Retrieved from https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/fao-statistical-yearbook-2024-reveals-critical-insights-on-the-sustainability-of-agriculture-food-security-and-the-importance-of-agrifood-in-employment/en.

European Commission. (2025). CAP strategic plans: Ireland. Retrieved from https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/cap-my-country/cap-strategic-plans/ireland_en.

Hackett, P. (2023). Farming's 'social licence' under unprecedented level of strain, Hackett warns. Independent.ie. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/farmings-social-licence-under-unprecedented-level-of-strain-hackett-warns/a1422250780.html.

Feeney, A. (2024). Farmers' fear of not growing enough grass outweighed water quality concerns, Nuffield scholar says. Independent.ie. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/farmers-fear-of-not-growing-enough-grass-outweighed-water-quality-concerns-nuffield-scholar-says/a2118454395.html.

Riedel, E. (2024). Deforestation will continue as long as trees are worth more cut down than standing, Brazil warns. Independent.ie. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/deforestation-will-continue-as-long-as-trees-are-worth-more-cut-down-than-standing-brazil-warns/a1231005575.html.

Yamada, M. (2023). Personal communication. Journalist at The Japan Agricultural News, Tokyo, Japan.

Dutch Insider - Independent.ie. (2024). Ireland urged to build own veal industry as scrutiny mounts on live exports. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/beef/ireland-urged-to-build-own-veal-industry-as-scrutiny-mounts-on-live-exports/a2059007961.html.

Talbot, S. (2024). Dairy industry focused too much on the milk price – former Glanbia boss Siobhán Talbot. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/dairy-industry-focused-too-much-on-the-milk-price-former-glanbia-boss-siobhan-talbot/a1727951079.html.

Politics feature for Independent.ie. (2024). The farming lobby still has access to the top brass – but does it pack any real political punch? Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/the-farming-lobby-still-has-access-to-the-top-brassbut-does-it-pack-any-real-political-punch/a2043265220.html.

Martin, M. (2024). There's a disdain for agriculture in some corners of the Dáil – it's quite shocking: Micheál Martin. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/theres-a-disdain-for-agriculture-in-some-corners-of-the-dail-its-quite-shocking-micheal-martin/a1776180462.html.

EPA. (2023). EPA knew tweet about reducing red meat was likely to cause anger among the farming industry. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/epa-knew-tweet-about-reducing-red-meat-was-likely-to-cause-anger-among-the-farming-industry/a75147617.html.

Gorman, F. (2023). Gorman calls out state agencies afraid to defend farmers in fear of 'climate denier' label. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/gorman-calls-out-state-agencies-afraid-to-defend-farmers-in-fear-of-climate-denier-label/a210943183.html.

Gorman, F. (2024). Teagasc's policy was 'drive on' up until recently and farmers followed it, IFA president says. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/teagascs-policy-was-drive-on-up-until-recently-and-farmers-followed-it-ifa-president-says/a1085485924.html.

Bergin, J. (2024). People outside of farming want to devastate the dairy herd, Tirlán CEO warns. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/people-outside-of-farming-want-to-devastate-the-dairy-herd-tirlan-ceo-warns/a1594691202.html.

Soares, G. (2024). Personal communication. Attorney and Agricultural Lobbyist, California, USA.

Vandermeersch, P. (2023). Personal communication. CEO, Mediahuis Ireland.

Guebara, S. (2024). Why Ireland's beef with Brazil is such a mismatch – they are barely aware of our existence. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/beef/why-irelands-beef-with-brazil-is-such-a-mismatch-they-are-barely-aware-of-our-existence/a378860408.html.

Coelho, R. (2024). 'My Droughtmaster cattle are very adaptive animals': Inside a 9,000ha Brazilian ranch battling tight profit margins and environmental pressures. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/my-droughtmaster-cattle-are-very-adaptive-animals-inside-a-9000ha-brazilian-ranch-battling-tight-profit-margins-and-environmental-pressures/a1730310852.html.

Kumar Mudgal, P. (2024). India set to capitalise on Western dairy decline with annual expansion of 10pc. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/dairy/india-set-to-capitalise-on-western-dairy-decline-with-annual-expansion-of-10pc/a908844833.html.

Bhagyalakshmi. (2024). Inside the Indian dairy business building a 15,000-cow farm. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/dairy/inside-the-indian-dairy-business-building-a-15000-cow-farm/a592720983.html.

Notman, P. (2024). Why this Australian dairy farmer ships his milk seven hours across country. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/dairy/why-this-australian-dairy-farmer-ships-his-milk-seven-hours-across-country/a1157194544.html.

Kingman, C. (2024). How this engineer is solving the farm labour shortage with autonomous tractors. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/machinery/how-this-engineer-is-solving-the-farm-labour-shortage-with-autonomous-tractors/a1613386003.html.

Henderson, C. (2024). 'Going to war is not a good idea': How this New Zealand dairy farm leader manages environmental criticism. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/dairy/going-to-war-is-not-a-good-idea-how-this-new-zealand-dairy-farm-leader-manages-environmental-criticism/a607727516.html.

Bloomfield. (2024). How this Aussie couple ditched intensive livestock farming and doubled the price they get for their animals. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/beef/how-this-aussie-couple-ditched-intensive-livestock-farming-and-doubled-the-price-they-get-for-their-animals/a146738267.html.

De Wilde, R. (2024). How this Dutch farmer plans to handle the loss of his derogation. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/dairy/how-this-dutch-farmer-plans-to-handle-the-loss-of-his-derogation/a1639097636.html.

Wilkins, S. (2024). ‘The industry needs to have the answers before the questions are asked’: Meet the Kiwi milking 3,500 cows who is promoting farmer-led solutions to eco problems. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/the-industry-needs-to-have-the-answers-before-the-questions-are-asked-meet-the-kiwi-milking-3500-cows-who-is-promoting-farmer-led-solutions-to-eco-problems/a675768089.html.

McCormack, C. (2024). How Swiss farmers keep society on their side. Retrieved from https://www.farmersjournal.ie/how-swiss-farmers-keep-society-on-their-side-840645.

Hurson, N. (2025). Better to farm under the ‘devilish’ EU subsidies we know than the devil we don’t. Retrieved from https://www.farmersjournal.ie/better-to-farm-under-the-devilish-eu-subsidies-we-know-than-the-devil-we-don-t-860145.

O’Connor, S. (2023). More than 25pc of Irish farmers are burnt out, new research finds. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/more-than-25pc-of-irish-farmers-are-burnt-out-new-research-finds/a1365570023.html.

Sutherland, L. (2023). CAP encourages the systemic exploitation of migrant workers, says expert. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/cap-encourages-the-systemic-exploitation-of-migrant-workers-says-expert/42372690.html.

Bord Bia. (2024). Farm groups and agri-business stakeholders: Plan emerges to team up to tackle farming’s negative image. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/farm-groups-and-agri-business-stakeholders-plan-emerges-to-team-up-to-tackle-farmings-negative-image/a1456068495.html.

McCullough, D. (2024). Controlling the narrative? That’s up to us farmers – not a bunch of PR chaps looking to get rich. Independent.ie. Retrieved from https://m.independent.ie/life/home-garden/darragh-mccullough-controlling-the-narrative-thats-up-to-us-farmers-not-a-bunch-of-pr-chaps-looking-to-get-rich/a638387694.html.

Hansen, C. (2024). Climate stress and lack of public support causing depression and suicide in farmers – Commissioner. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/news/climate-stress-and-lack-of-public-support-causing-depression-and-suicide-in-farmers-commissioner/a65152853.html.

Hackett, P. (2024). Pippa Hackett: I know there’s farmers across the country cheering that the Greens are gone – but that doesn’t mean the regulations are going to get any less. Retrieved from https://www.independent.ie/farming/pippa-hackett-i-know-theres-farmers-across-the-country-cheering-that-the-greens-are-gone-but-that-doesnt-mean-the-regulations-are-going-to-get-any-less/a2063260213.html.

Plain English Compendium Summary

Project Title:	**Who tells farming's story best?** Mapping the farming maestros who shape agriculture's narrative

Scholar:	Niall Hurson
Address:	Tyredigan, Smithborough, Co Monaghan
Phone:	083 191 8325
Email:	niall.hurson1@gmail.com

Objectives

This project set out to understand who influences the public's view of farming and how Irish farmers can regain control of their own story. The main goals were to:

- Identify key players shaping public opinion about agriculture, including media, policymakers, environmental groups, agribusiness, and farmers themselves.
- Understand the challenges farmers face in communicating with the public, such as fragmented political representation, increased environmental scrutiny, and growing international competition.
- Explore examples of successful farmer-led storytelling that improved trust and shaped better policies.
- Examine how developing countries, like India and Brazil, are taking advantage of Western agriculture's struggles.
- Provide practical, real-world recommendations for how farmers, industry leaders, and policymakers can improve agriculture's image and impact.

Background

Farmers are central to food production, rural life, and environmental management. But in today's world, the story of farming is often told by others; journalists, campaigners, politicians, and corporations, leaving farmers themselves unheard or misrepresented.

As climate concerns grow and consumer values shift, farmers are under more pressure than ever. This project looks at how farmers can take back control of the conversation, to protect their future and the future of food.

Research	This study involved global travel, on-the-ground interviews, and case studies from six continents. It included: ● Meetings with farmers, policymakers, environmentalists, journalists, and agribusiness leaders to hear a range of perspectives. ● Real-world examples of campaigns where farmers successfully improved their public image. ● Analysis of how media trends, regulations, and trade deals are influencing the way farming is viewed.
Outcomes	● Farmers must lead the conversation, if they don't speak up, others will speak for them. ● Public trust in farming is weakening, especially around environmental and ethical concerns. ● Financial rewards are key, sustainability efforts must make sense economically for farmers. ● Fewer farmers means less political power and more risk of being sidelined in policymaking. ● Countries like India are growing fast and could outpace Ireland if the sector doesn't adapt.
Implications	● Farming needs a united, confident voice, fragmented messaging weakens impact. ● PR spin doesn't work; open, honest communication builds trust. ● Policymakers must design smart incentives that reward sustainability and practical action. ● New trade opportunities should be embraced, Ireland can lead by exporting knowledge, not just produce. ● Agricultural education should start young, making ag science a core school subject will reconnect the public with where their food comes from.
Conclusion	Irish farming is at a crossroads. If farmers don't take charge of the story, others will and not always truthfully. This report shows that by working together, speaking with purpose, and embracing change, farmers can rebuild trust, influence policy, and shape a future they're proud to be part of.

Promotional summary

Who Tells Farming's Story Best?

Mapping the voices shaping the future of agriculture
by Niall Hurson, 2024 Nuffield Ireland Scholar

- 🌎 **Who shapes how we see farming?**
  Explore how media, policymakers, and environmental groups influence public perceptions and why farmers urgently need to reclaim their own story.

- 🚜 **The power of a united voice**
  Discover why the fragmentation of Ireland's farming lobby is weakening its political power and how farmers can rebuild influence.

- 🌳 **Sustainability vs. economic survival**
  Case studies from Brazil, India, and New Zealand illustrate global tensions and reveal practical strategies to balance productivity and environmental responsibility.

- 📣 **Why PR isn't enough**
  Learn why reactive campaigns fail and how proactive, authentic farmer-led communication wins back public trust and shapes better policy.

- 💡 **From crisis to confidence**
  Find out how countries like Switzerland have used farmer-driven initiatives to build public support, trust, and political influence.

- 🌐 **Lessons from abroad**
  Insights from global agricultural powerhouses highlight how Irish farmers can strategically position themselves amid growing international competition.

- 🧠 **Mental health & fairness matter**
  Understand why farmer burnout and social justice issues in farming need urgent attention and what practical solutions can help farmers thrive.

- 📚 **Practical roadmap for change**
  The report provides clear recommendations for farmers, policymakers, and industry leaders on strengthening farming's public narrative, sustainability, and future viability.