Unlocking Ireland's Agri-food Edge Through Strategic Collaboration

Working better together to boost brand, business and pride

A report for

NUFFIELD IRELAND

Farming Scholarships

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Executive Summary

Farming is a more than a profession in Ireland. It is the activity that carried the country forward in the first decades of the Republic and, in 2021, farming was the most common use of land in Ireland at 69.7% (CSO 2023).

How we farm and produce food in Europe today was shaped by the extreme food shortages in the period post-world war two. The focus then was on meeting the food needs of Europe. Now, production targets focus on "feeding the world". What these targets are and how they are achieved are sources of debate. Many within the farming sector advocate for achieving these targets through sustainable practices, as the negative impacts of more extreme weather events are already being felt on the ground. At the same time, as the biggest land user, the farming sector is a key player in whether or not Ireland meets its EU-mandated carbon emissions reduction and biodiversity targets.

Farming enterprises ultimately benefit economically and socially from healthy soil, water and air. And yet, there is a trend, especially in the media, of pitting farming against "environmentalism", creating a false narrative that environmental goals are "anti-farming". This trend is pushed by the media and enacted in the courts. The result of this is a tense public dialogue and relatively low levels of collaboration between national land-use governance and representative organisations, delaying much-needed action towards sustainable land use and food production.

The research questions are:

1. What causes unproductive dialogue amongst all organisations working in agriculture and the environment?
2. What is preventing greater collaboration earlier?
3. What are routes to productive action?

This report has looked at how collaboration is or is not happening between organisations working in and regulating agriculture and land use. The report is based on international travels through the Nuffield network - 22 interviews were carried out with people from government, farming unions, NGOs, and policy groups. Using the "iceberg model," it explores both the visible conflicts and the deeper causes of poor communication between organisations. The report then highlights real-world examples of innovative collaboration and what can be learned from them.

The main finding is that there is a false binary between agriculture and environmental concerns and an "us vs them" framing is limiting agricultural innovation and creating regulatory deadlock. Our ability to work together is held back by long-standing structural, cultural, and communication barriers. These challenges can be addressed through changes in how policy is made, how professionals are trained, and how the public conversation is framed

Here are the findings in more detail:

Routes to Productive Action

1. Change the perspective.

Put people in rooms together, early and often. The informal cooperation that works for Ireland in Brussels—where people from different departments bump into each other—can work in Dublin too. Proximity builds trust. The Danish agricultural carbon tax agreement or the USA Food and Agriculture Alliance are key examples

Teach across boundaries. A national skills audit could identify gaps and overlaps in climate, ag, and environmental knowledge—and help build shared vocabulary

Pilot joint platforms. Think Youth Food Forums; Cooperative advisory groups; Places where farmers, scientists, and climate thinkers actually share power—and ideas.

Invest in Balanced Media.

2. Go around the problem.

Start local. Community-based projects, like river basin management groups or Ag Edge in Eastern Australia, are already showing how progress can happen below the national level

Use trusted intermediaries. Organisations like Teagasc and NOTS, which straddle the line between research and field advice, are uniquely placed to guide practical, science-backed change—depending on leadership. France's La Cooperation Agricole leads by example

Acknowledge the diversity within our own camps

Why aren't we collaborating sooner?

Because the system isn't designed for it—and the culture isn't ready.

- **Trapped in silos:** Agriculture and environment often operate in parallel but separate worlds, with different languages, networks, and office buildings. If you work for DAFM, DCEE or the Department of Housing, chances are you don't casually cross paths. So assumptions grow. Misunderstandings harden. This can happen between but also within Departments
- **Generational gaps:** Many younger farmers aren't part of traditional farming representative bodies, and their absence is noticeable. At the same time, some environmental advocates struggle to connect meaningfully with farming communities—defaulting to criticism over conversation
- **Policy fragmentation:** Departments are misaligned, policies and strategies are designed in silos. Data is scattered. And without cross-departmental bridges—literal or figurative—it's easy for efforts to tangle or stall. There's no single view of the field, so people argue over pieces of the map.

The takeaway

We don't need more panels. We need better conversations, shared goals, and places to work side by side. If Ireland wants to lead on sustainable agriculture, it has to acknowledge culture and history but not let the past decide the potential of the future. The tools for collaboration are already here, either in Ireland or overseas, and now it's up to us to use them.

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Foreword

The Nuffield Ireland scholarship experience has deepened my understanding of where we are and where we can be when it comes to thriving food systems on the island of Ireland.

In my career, I have had the chance to work and learn about food and farming from many angles, including time in horticulture operations and urban agriculture as well as in kitchens and cheesemaking businesses. While not a commercial farmer, I've built a strong respect for anyone who undertakes the profession. I've long been interested in what "food system" actually means, as well as how change happens.

While leading trainings about food education and horticulture, I met a lot of people working in food and farming and listened to a lot of opinions about how to farm, who is right and who is wrong. Taking part in a food systems business start-up programme which had low input from active farmers made me consider the possibility that traditional agriculture had a communication problem and was not getting into the right rooms. This curiosity formed the basis of my Nuffield research topic.

Change happens whether we like it or not. How painful it is and how many people can benefit from it depends on how we organise and what motivates us.

We all can see change coming. My motivation for this study topic is the belief agriculture and a healthy environment go hand in hand and that we owe it to farming communities all over the world to figure out how to overcome policy and practice deadlock to move faster towards a sustainable farming which everyone agrees with.

The potential positive impact is high for the health of our land, our communities and our pockets if we manage to improve our communication, collaboration and planning skills.

Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the guidance of my mentor, Karen Brosnan, the onboarding and constant reassurance by the Nuffield team, Catherine Lascurettes and Chair Joe Leonard, and the generous and visionary support of the Nuffield Ireland 2024 scholarship sponsors: FBD Trust, Aurivo, Bord Bia, Dairygold, Golden Jubilee Trust, Irish Farmers Journal, the IFA, Kerry Group, Lakeland Dairies, LIC and MSD Animal Health.

I would like to thank our country hosts during our GFP travels, in particular the teams in Nuffield France, USA, and Chile, as well as Bernadette Mortensen of Nuffield Australia, who coordinated our time in Denmark. I would like to warmly recognise the hospitality of Pippa Jones, Ben Poschelk, Michael Taylor and families in Eastern Australia, Shigeo Maeda and family of Hokkaido as well as the agriculture team in the Irish Embassy of Japan, Thomas Legge, and lastly Noel Banville of IFA Brussels. Thank you to all for making my solo research travels possible.

I wish to warmly acknowledge the 22 people interviewed, everyone who opened their farm and boardroom for us during the GFP and afterwards, and my fellow Nuffield Ireland 2024 scholars for undertaking this epic journey together.

Thank you to my reviewers, in particular Alison Holmes, Tom Arnold, and Micheál Ó Cinnéide.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Maggie and Shay Garvey, and my sister Anna, for their continued support and care.

Abbreviations

2. **DAFM** – Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
3. **DG AGRI** – Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (European Commission)
4. **DG ENVI** – Directorate-General for Environment (European Commission)
5. **DCEE** – Department of the Climate, Energy and the Environment
6. **CAP** – Common Agricultural Policy
7. **IFA** – Irish Farmers' Association
8. **LAWPRO** – Local Authority Waters Programme
9. **ASSAP** – Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme
10. **ACRES** – Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme
11. **ICSMA** – Irish Climate and Sustainable Management Alliance (assumed from context; please confirm actual full name)
12. **SDG** – Sustainable Development Goals
13. **GWP** – Global Water Partnership (assumed from context; please confirm if referring to a different entity)

Objectives

“It’s easier to divide and point your finger…you feel good about it but you don’t get anything done. Sometimes you have to do something uncomfortable to be able to move forward and be successful.”

- Member of USA Farm Bureau and the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance, 2025

Change is a fact of life and no one working a land-based profession can disagree that the past ten years have been marked by a high level of changes, from regulations, to weather events, to market prices, to when the seasons start.

How we react to change depends on many factors. There have been a diversity of reactions from across the land-use sector to the present challenge of climate change, some of which have been portrayed in the media and more and more in government halls as conflicting. The most common conflicting pair: the traditional farming community and campaigners for climate action.

But what if we take a moment, step back from binaries, and consider the proposition: are farming and a healthy environment really so separate?

There is good reason to spend time on this question. Farmers who did not see themselves in the Green Deal policies relating to food production took to the streets, organised and supported by unions, cooperatives, and private enterprise. This resulted in large EU policy files relating to sustainable land use not becoming law or being watered down. How much time and energy could be saved if there was consensus or at least compromise at the policy creation stage? Are farmers not environmentally conscious or just not consulted? How did it get to the point where farming had to defend its right to produce at the expense of environmental action, in spite of the fact that production depends on a healthy environment?

A juicy story sells papers and conflict is juicier than cooperation, at least for now. Media tends to exaggerate or set the stage for harsh words and strong positions. The exaggerations contain grains of truth, and since we are consuming so much media every day, we can begin to trust our phones to tell us how bad or extreme something has become, rather than let our

real-world experiences form our judgements. Wariness, assumptions, mistrust, frustration and sometimes even hatred are expressed in traditional farming circles for environmental and/or climate campaigners and vice versa. Dig deeper and it seems the most common areas these two groups encounter each other, beyond reading the news, are at protests and in the courts. All in spite of the fact that they may have more in common with each other than not, namely an intimate connection with the importance of healthy soil, air and water for meeting our food, fuel and fibre needs.

Campaigning is by its nature one-note and not often given to compromise. This Nuffield research instead focuses on ways to move beyond binary framing towards a more productive conversation of how to farm sustainably for the long term.

Main Research Questions

1. What causes unproductive dialogue amongst all organisations working in agriculture and the environment?
2. What is preventing greater collaboration earlier?
3. What are routes to productive action?

Research Objectives

a. Examine the current relationship between Irish agriculture and environmental sectors, knowledge and actions
b. Explore what beliefs underpin current behaviours
c. Gather international examples of high level collaboration as well as on-the-ground initiatives
d. Provide analysis and recommendations.

Chapter 1 Context

Where we are and how we got here.

It is possible that the pattern of delayed action in the past is blurring the full recognition of the proactive actions of today. Ireland's legal commitments alongside the reality that the climate is changing requires coordinated action from agriculture supported by environmental expertise and yet proactive collaboration seems to be challenging

The last twenty years have seen a push towards the most ambitious action for keeping our environment healthy and liveable at a global and a European level. Starting in 2015 with a unanimous global agreement to keep the world within an inhabitable global temperature by reducing fossil fuel emissions, and expanding to include biodiversity and circular production goals, our laws, practices and goalposts have changed radically. The speed of change has been breathtaking and norm-breaking, for example, Ireland declared a climate and biodiversity emergency (Cunningham 2019) and then fixed our national emissions reductions target in law (DECC 2021), the EU Green Deal targets launched in 2019, and our fifth national agri-food strategy, *Food Vision 2030,* took a "food systems" approach for the first time (DAFM 2021).

These legal commitments can only be fulfilled through radical practice change in three core sectors: agriculture, construction and transport. Such practice change takes time to implement and can incur high financial costs in the short term (NESDO 2023, pp. vii). New visions and accompanying regulation have been launched at national level, many translating the financial supports and regulations decided at EU level (Europa 2023). In addition to the Climate Action Plan, which is updated every five years, national visions and plans for the bioeconomy, biodiversity, forestry, horticulture have been launched.

The agri-food sector is responding to the obligation placed upon it through technical solutions ranging from scientific to financial (Schulte et al. 2012), a new vision (the bioeconomy), and

by exploring new markets (eg carbon and biodiversity credits). At the same time, experts charged with ensuring Ireland fulfils its legal obligations challenge the sector to move faster and to be more ambitious (CCAC 2025). Panels of experts call out all sectors for not moving fast enough (IFAC 2025b) and some agricultural organisations feel unduly singled out by traditional media (Halloren 2025). A common position for Irish farmer representative bodies to take in the face of the albeit high number of new regulations impacting farmer practices has been defensive, saying "no" first and "maybe" later. For example, the IFA's position in relation to Green Deal Policies as a whole (IFA 2020) and the Nature Restoration Law specifically (IFA 2023). At the same time, environmental NGOs have tactically used lawsuits and public campaigns to move public opinion, forcing action (An Taisce 2024, Friends of the Irish Environment 2021).

It is important to recognise the scale of the change being asked of the Irish agricultural sector, considering its 88-year history since the founding of the Republic. At that time, environmental health was not a top priority for the young country as it fought against high unemployment and a housing crisis in the 1950s and 1960s (Laffan and O'Mahony 2008). Joining Europe (the EEC) in 1973 was a watershed moment for Irish agriculture because it opened up a large market for Irish produce and released financial support for farmers, while at the same time making Ireland answerable to European law in key areas including the environment and trade.

Key European-led regulations which Ireland as a member state has had to adopt included the Nitrates Directive 1991 and the Habitats Directive 1992. The state delayed in implementing these regulations, in particular the Nitrates Directive (Börzel and Risse 2006). However, a fundamental shift is happening at ground level with the introduction of ecology and specific sustainability knowledge areas into all areas of learning and knowledge exchange, from advisory (ASSAP) to farming education (the Green Cert, foundational agriculture BScs and more specialised BScs such as Sustainable Food Systems in UCD). Signpost farms such as Farm Zero-C are modelling whether a zero-emissions pasture-based dairy farm is possible and sustainability has been measured and thus accounted for through the annual Teagasc national farm survey sustainability report since 2013 (the four key metrics are economic, environmental, social and innovation) (Teagasc 2025).

In summary, this chapter has outlined the scale and complexity of the shift being asked of agriculture. From the historical prioritisation of economic recovery and market integration to

the more recent embrace of sustainability strategies, the sector is undergoing a significant transformation.

However, the legacy of past delays and siloed governance structures—where agricultural and environmental mandates developed along separate, often opposing, tracks—continues to shape current dynamics. Regulatory compliance, legal pressure from environmental groups, and public debate have all played roles in driving change, but they have also contributed to a reactive and sometimes polarised atmosphere. While collaboration is increasing, it remains uneven, and longstanding tensions persist.

Chapter 2 Methodology

This chapter discusses the tools used to answer the three research questions:

1. What causes unproductive dialogue amongst all organisations working in agriculture and the environment?
2. What is preventing greater collaboration earlier?
3. What are routes to productive action?

It was decided to take the same approach for the first two questions together and address the third using a separate method. The first two questions, because they focus on the current state of affairs and what is causing it, are answered using farm and business visits combined with a simple model. The purpose of this is to organise the findings in a more clear way. The model chosen to explore these two questions is the ice-berg model. This model proposes that events that we encounter are the result of trends, structures and beliefs. The events can be seen (they are “above the water”), while the elements that have shaped and caused the events are harder to see (they are “below the water”). The benefits of digging deeper into these aspects can help us to take longer term, strategic action and improve the whole system in which we are all working, rather than stay stuck in a cycle of events and short-term reactions (Academy for Systems Change 2025).

Figure 2.1. Source: https://donellameadows.org/systems-thinking-resources/

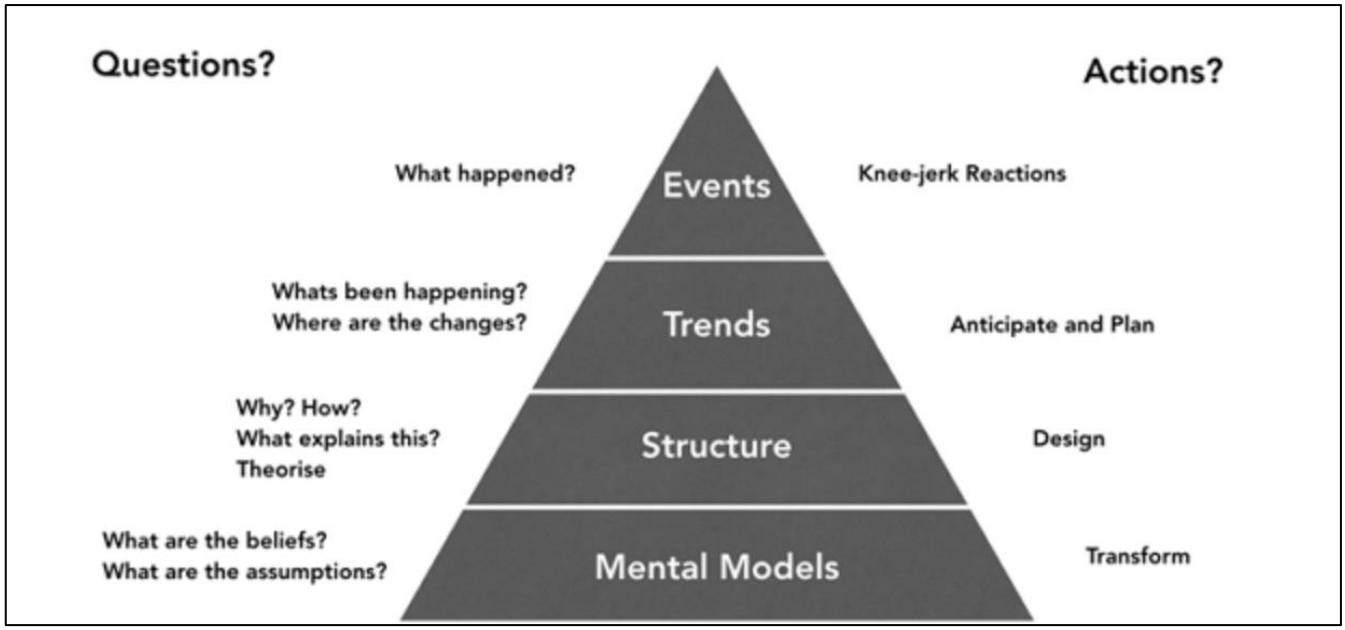

Figure 2.2. Source: https://www.vskills.in/certification/tutorial/systems-thinking/ ; Northwest Earth Institute 2017 ; Nguyen and Mani 2011

2.1 Using this model to answer questions

In order to turn this model into a research method, we need to pick a point in time and an event or a series of events. We need to map the stakeholders impacted and involved in these events and choose ways to learn more about the aspects “under the water”.

This Nuffield research began Spring of 2024. The events which inspired the research were an tweet from the Irish Environmental Protection Agency and the withdrawal of the sustainable use of pesticides EU Commission proposal following its rejection by the EU parliament, both in Winter 2023. These have been chosen not necessarily as objects of intense study, but rather as indicators of a deep, ongoing and unproductive rift in how we sustainably meet our food-fuel-fibre needs in Ireland.

Stakeholders were mapped through desk research, drawing upon stakeholder maps of agricultural, the Nuffield past scholar directory, and environmental “eco-systems” that already exist, as well as identifying key people with a “birds eye view” of the topic and asking them for referrals and introductions. The geographical boundary for the stakeholder mapping was Ireland, Brussels and Rome. The justification for this boundary was that this research focuses on the Irish context, which is intimately shaped by the laws created by the European Union in Brussels.

A semi-structure interview was chosen as the tool of choice to learn about what is “below the water”. A semi-structured interview is an interview type in which questions are prepared in advance and shared with the interviewee but the discussion can go in different directions if the topic is relevant to the main research questions. Questions were built around the three submerged elements in the iceberg model: trends, structure and beliefs. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in the appendix.

The first round of interviews were in Ireland and were carried out over the course of five months, between 1st January 2024 and 31st May 2024. Nine interviews were carried out as a mixture of in-person and mobile phone calls. The next round of data collection took place between the 28th of October and the 7th of November 2024 in Brussels. Eleven semi-structured interviews were carried out in, the majority in person. Almost every interview lasted one hour, with some interviewees agreeing to follow-up discussions as needed. Notes were taken by hand

and later digitalised. Eighteen interviews were completed and informed the findings for the first two research questions.

Location and Organisation	Interview type
European Union	
NGO Environmental Think Tank	In-person
NGO Alternative Proteins Lobby	In-person
Copa-Cogeca, commodities and environment	In-person and virtual
Irish Permanent Representative	In-person
DG ENVI	In-person
DG AGRI	In-person
Freelance Journalist	In-person
ICOS EU	In-person
Irish MEP	In-person
Ireland	
Irish Farmer Union	Phone call
DAFM	In-person
Irish rural farmer environmental organisation	In person
Ex EPA	Phone call
Council Chief Executive	Phone call
Climate Change Advisory Council member	In person
Upland Sheep Farmer, Wicklow	In person and farm visit
Ex TD, Minister of State, DAFM	In person
Strategic Advisor, National Food Policy	Phone call

Figure 2.3. List of interviewee organisations, Ireland and Brussels, Spring-Autumn 2024.

2.1.1 Model limitation

It is acknowledged that this model can lead us to oversimplify things (ThinkNPC 2025)

2.2 Answering the third question

In order to address the third research question “what are routes to productive action?”, it was decided to gather examples of unlikely collaborations and activities from as many farm and organisation visits as possible.

To do this, a travel programme was designed to include locations comparable as well as highly contrasting to the Irish context. Examples were gathered during the GFP tour as well as during self-directed travel. Travel was made possible through the international Nuffield network. In addition, further examples were collected through recommendations made during the interviews carried out in the research period mentioned above.

Many examples were gathered. From this collection, the examples most relevant to the Irish context were selected and short case studies were built for purpose of future use, listed in figure 2.3 below. These case studies are shared in detail in Chapter Three.

Case Study	Name	Location
1	Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance	USA
2	Green Tripartite Agreement	Denmark
3	AgEdge	East Coast Australia
4	À la Rencontre des Jeunes 2023	France
5	Sustainable Communities: Sustainable Farming Within an Intensive Farming System 2024	Ireland

Figure 2.4. List of Case Studies

Chapter 3 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the Nuffield travels. First, the answers to the first two research questions, "What causes unproductive dialogue amongst all organisations working in agriculture and the environment and what is preventing greater collaboration earlier? are presented. The findings are organised under Trends, Structures, and Beliefs.

Five case studies from around the world are then shared, addressing question three: "what are routes to productive action?" Each case study relates to recommendations made in Chapter four.

3.1 Trends (trends or patterns of related events or situations)

A trend is defined as "a general or change in a situation of in the way that people are behaving" (Cambridge Dictionary 2025). Here we discuss trends observed by interviewees and by the media. In this section, findings from interviewees regarding trends or patterns are shared.

The focus of this research is agricultural-environmental relations. At the time of starting this research in early 2024, public pushback was growing against certain elements of the CAP agreed in 2020 and implemented from 2023, as well as proposals being brought forward by the EU Commission. Farmer protests took place across the European Union, including Brussels, and solidarity protests were held in Ireland in February 2024 (O'Sullivan 2024). In response to protests, the Commission introduced a proposal to adjust the strictness of compliance to EU environmental protection laws (Hickey 2024). At the same time, a longer trend was observed by interviewees working in agricultural policy of the appearance, in the last ten-five years, of more and more environmental NGOs (eNGOs) lobbying the agricultural policy process. This was coupled with a move away from utilising agronomists as advisors in favour of lawyers and policy experts. In the opinion of the interviewee, the effect of the first trend was to shift the process of policy making from being informed by expert/lived experience input by agronomists and farmer representative organisations, to a defence and justification of every suggestion made.

Exploring this observation further, there have been NGOs and private organisations lobbying on specific food and agricultural causes for multiple decades. The campaigns to reduce chemicals harmful to living things and the health of soil, air, and water, as well as to improve animal welfare, have been ongoing since at least the beginning of the organic movement in the

1940s[1]. Anti-GMO protests took hold at the turn of the millennium, resulting in nation-level bans on the use of genetic modification in plant breeding for consumption. However, the link between C02e emissions and agriculture has only become widely discussed in recent years, although mentioned already in the 1990s as part of a global scientific review (IPCC 1992), and this has brought new eNGOs into agriculture and food production lobbying. The rise in number of these organisations corresponded with the wave of global climate action commitment peaking at COP 15 in 2015, a report on the climate impact of diet by the Lancet, a leading scientific journal (2019), a boom in media exploring sustainable food systems such as the movie *Kiss the Ground* (USA, 2020) and the book *Regenesis* (UK, 2022), as well as an increase in the number of third level university programmes in the arts and humanities, including geography, anthropology, as well as business, economics, development, and politics, in "sustainable food systems", the term brought forward by the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 (FAO 2021). One interviewee, an eNGO in Brussels who focuses on diet shift as a climate action, did not include farmers in their strategic process. They shared an assumption that most if not all farmers would be against the proposal, resistant to necessary change.

At the same time, where we live and what we do has been changing in Europe. There has been a steady move of people from the country to the city and a related decrease in the number of rural based farmers under 40. Across the European continent, farms are consolidating: the number of farms are decreasing while the amount of land being farmed remains steady. Those that are under 40 and farming are less and less involved with their representative organisation. A young dairy farmer from Denmark shared that he does not participate in his local farmer representative organisation because the meetings start too late in the day and last for too long, clashing with his parenting duties. Interviewees from Ireland and from the largest farmer representative organisation in Brussels confirmed the increasing challenge of attracting new members and retaining engagement in active ones. The number of people who have no connection to a farm or farmer is higher than it ever has been, and at the same time, the European farming voice is fragmented and weighted towards the older generations.

Interviewees in agricultural policy observed that there is a general trend towards reduction in meaningful farmer consultation. At the start of 2024, Ursula Von der Leyen launched the

[1] An interest in organic farming started in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany at roughly the same time in the 1940s and The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements is founded in 1972, linking the countries together. Slow Food was created at the same time in Italy and promoted the preservation of regional food production techniques and products, protesting the "McDonaldisation" of food in Italy.

Strategic Dialogue on Agriculture. The final report was delivered in September 2024 and 29 participants hoped for the inclusion of the dialogue's recommendation in the incoming DG AGRI Commissioner's programme (European Commission 2024). However, the recommendations along with the programme have been challenged by the new Commission's overall change of direction towards higher deregulation and budgetary consolidation. While the protests at the start of this research focused on the threat posed by over-regulation and environmental requirements to farmer livelihood, now the threats come from the potential removal of a suite of financial supports as the post-2027 CAP negotiations roll on, as well as the uncertain market impact of upcoming trade agreements.

Taking these trends together, we see an increase in the number visions of our food production future, but a decrease in agreement about which one is best and how to get there. More visions are created by people who have less direct generational connection to farming, while the farmer vision of the future is more fragmented and often missing the opinions of the next farming generation.

The ways in which farmers can be involved in the policy process are changing at an EU level, and it seems there is less patience for the farmer voice in policymaking circles, as the EU budget focus shifts to defence –the opportunity is here for a stronger alliance of an informed agriculture-food-environmental front to change this. Case study one provides an example of what this could look like.

3.2 Structures (policies, processes, and practices)

This section focuses on the insights from interviews into the structures, i.e. the policies, processes, and practices, that shape agriculture-environmental relations in Ireland, with consideration for Brussels, and contribute to the trends outlined above.

The first key observation from interviews was: organisations and cultures which have long worked separately are now working together but uneasily and not without friction. Simultaneously, examples demonstrate the potential of a next generation of workstreams where agriculture and environmental expertise are one and the same.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the key actors and interactions in Ireland's agri-food industry, its research, representation, and governance. The lines represent interaction between the actors. The diagram shows that Irish research organisations, government, representation organisations,

private enterprise, and certain EU think tanks are highly connected. This high connectivity has been criticised by advocates of climate action as a capture of the whole system by lobby groups for one or two positions, such as dairy. Conversely, farmers outside of Ireland commend the ways in which the different organisations work together and support each other. Most likely somewhere in the middle is true.

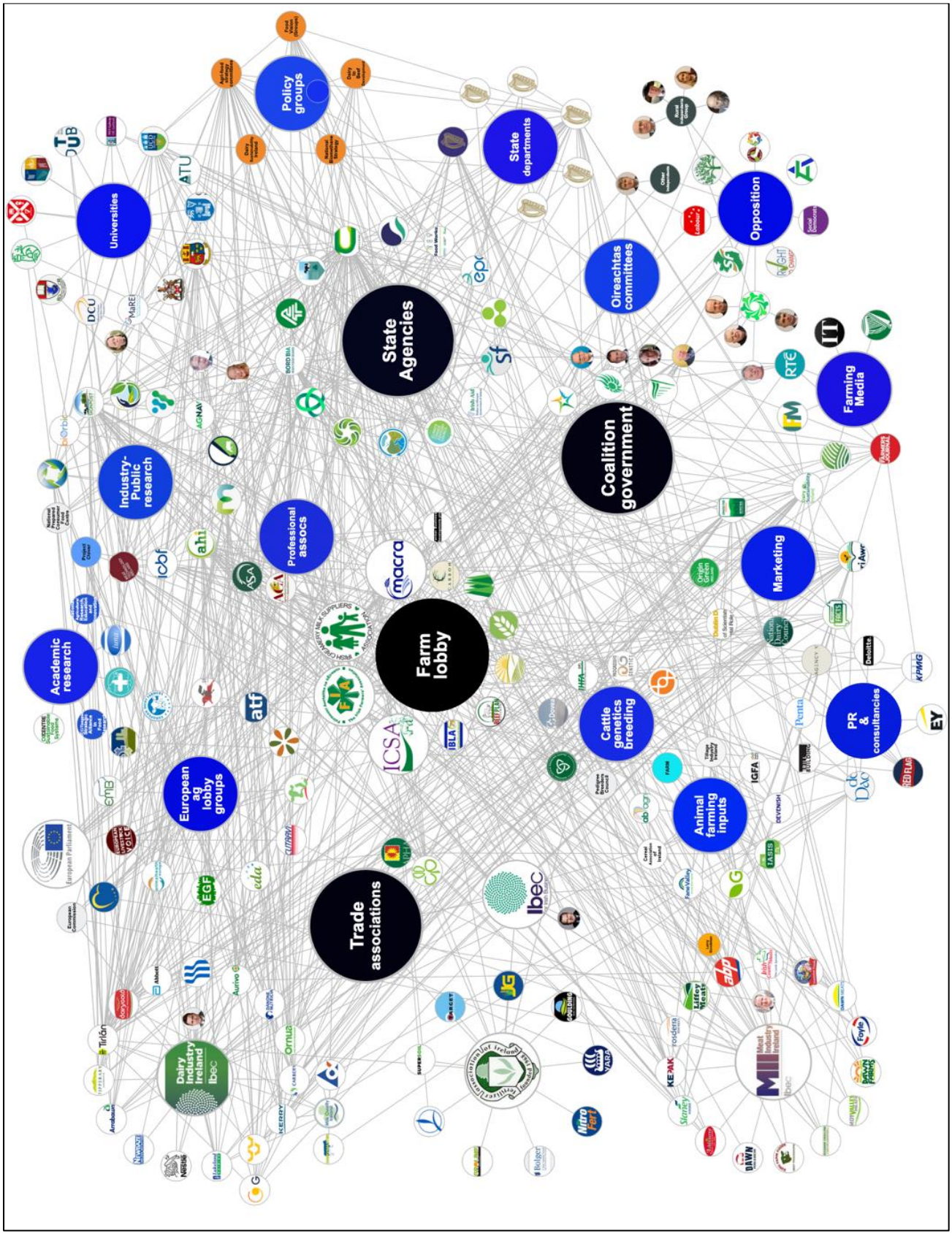

Figure 3.1 Agri-food sector relationship map. Map credit: Paul Price, commissioned by DeSmog online newspaper (Cooke and Herrmann 2024).

3.2.1 Tracking sustainable agriculture priorities in Agricultural Departments

It is true that the Department of Agriculture is highly focused on Ireland's agri-food economic potential. One way to learn what a government department prioritises is to look at their department titles, ministries, and offices within each department, as well as the semi-state bodies. The following link leads to a live map which compares the organisation of departments with responsibility for agriculture and food across six high-income countries, recorded in Autumn 2024.

Explore it yourself online: Departments of Agricultures Organisations 2024 https://embed.kumu.io/09122e8eb27a6c6e9ec5b099c4b06fa4

When examining the histories of each department across the six countries, one can track the priorities of the changing governments based on the changes of department name across election cycles. In France, Denmark and Ireland, fisheries have moved in and out of the department, as has forestry. Food also moves in and out of the title, with the strongest emphasis placed by France in its current ministry of **Food Sovereignty** and Agriculture. Environmental priorities appears in the France department in the office of "Food and Agricultural Transitions", as well as "Competitiveness and Environmental Performance". The ministry works closely with the Ministry of Ecological Transition. In Denmark, the departments of the environment and agriculture were combined for five years between 2015 and 2020. Now the Danish department of agriculture has offices for "Environmental Affairs" and "Organic Farming". Finally, in the United States Department of Agriculture, the management of national parks is included in the department's remit under "Natural Resources and Environment", as is "Farm Production and Conservation". Ireland, Australia and Japan have no office or ministry featuring environmental objectives in the title in their agricultural departments.

This is a broad sweep of departments, and is a snapshot in time, since the organisation of departments can change every three to five years as new governments are elected. The inclusion or exclusion of certain topics, such as environment, conservation, sustainable development, does not necessarily mean that these are not being included in work programmes, but it does mean that they may not be the priority for that particular government.

On a European level, we can look at the European Commission, Europe's equivalent of a civil service. From 2019-2023, the department of agriculture (DG AGRI) was included with the departments of environment, transport, energy and health under the Green Deal banner

(Politico 2019). This has changed in the most recent EU elections, however the departments of agriculture, climate and the environment continue to work together on environmental aspects of the Common Agricultural Policy (DG AGRI 2024).

It is clear from this overview that the priorities for governance and regulation of agriculture shift depending on the party in power at the time, at national or EU level. It is also clear that instances of environmental outcomes connected to agriculture, food, and sometimes rural affairs, fisheries, and forestry, appearing in organisational titles have been increasing in the last fifteen years, based on the map data. Environmental priorities have not historically lived within agricultural departments[2]. How has this structural change in governance organisation impacted agri-environmental relations?

Interviewees reported multiple times that there was a low culture of collaboration between departments and when policy priorities required collaboration, such as conditionality in CAP, the process can be rushed or sometimes streamlined by whichever department holds ultimate responsibility for the proposal.

In Ireland, it was observed that it was difficult to check in with civil service colleagues working in areas of food, agriculture and the environment if they worked in a different department. The reason for this was as simple as the fact that Irish departments are located five to ten minutes by car away from each other, and that food, agriculture and environment workstreams (including water quality, natural resources, and climate emissions) were split between as many as five departments. The positive impact of being close to colleagues working in different departments was emphasised by the positive experience of Irish civil servants taken from different departments in Dublin working on the same floor of the Irish permanent representative building in Brussels. As colleagues were just down the hall, cross-departmental positions could be checked and proposals assessed much more rapidly than in Dublin. The same challenge

[2] The need for environmental regulation started as protest movements in the 1960s (Meyer 2011) and only began to be acknowledged by European government and law in the 1980s, initially through the creation of a Commission Directorate with very little power (Cini 1997). The fact that a separate government department had to be established was evidence that environmental outcomes were not already internalised in the main commercial industries (Cini 1997). These factors combined resulted in the governance and business of agriculture being regarded as separate to the governance and maintenance of the environment. It is important to note too that, at an Irish and EU level, agricultural departments have had at least a forty-year head start in building work culture, relationships and norms compared to younger departments.

exists at an EU level to a slightly lesser extent, with a four minute drive between the relevant departments.

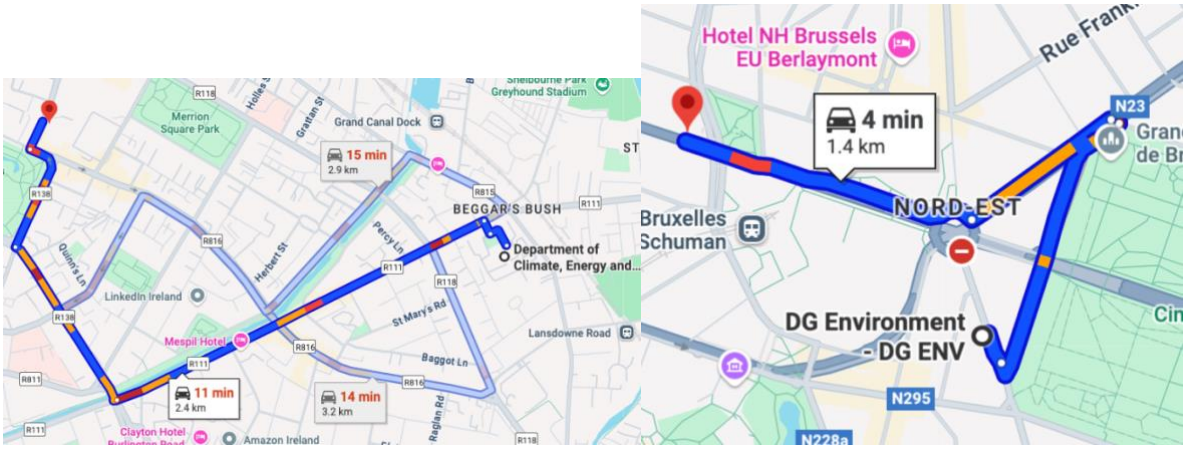

Figure 3.2 Two maps demonstrating the distance by car between agriculture departments and other departments with shared files. Left: Dublin with DAFM in the top left corner, Right: Brussels with DG AGRI in the top left corner (Google Maps, October 2025).

You have to wonder, whether policymakers responsible for different areas of agriculture, food and environmental regulation could develop policies more palatable to all stakeholders if the different departments had greater opportunity to work literally side by side. Case study two provides a blueprint.

We also have to ask whether the deeply entrenched work culture and "ways of doing things" in long-established departments, such as the department of agriculture, are more wary of organisational change than younger departments, and are less equipped with the skills needed to meaningfully collaborate and/or incorporate new workstreams and expertise into long-existing work areas. In Ireland's case, this challenge could extend to the entire agri-food "ecosystem", as mapped in figure 3.1. Case study five proposes an on-the-ground way to ensure upskilling.

3.2.2 Different professional pipelines

Farming and environmental professions, such as the area of ecology, remain niche fields within Irish and broader European society. According to Eurostat (2024), only approximately 2% of the Irish population is directly engaged in farming, a statistic that reflects general trends across Europe, with the exception of countries such as Romania. This limited demographic

representation contributes to a general public unfamiliarity with both the complexities facing contemporary farmers and the ecological systems they interact with and rely upon.

The low level of overlap between agricultural and environmental professions further exacerbates this disconnect. Opportunities for cross-sectoral engagement are minimal, both formally and informally, resulting in siloed professional communities (a finding based on personal correspondence, multiple interviewees). In Ireland, farming is traditionally a multi-generational practice and represents the country's oldest indigenous industry. This history has produced a deeply embedded pipeline for entry into the profession, supported by a broad network of institutions and social structures that foster a distinct occupational identity and culture.

By contrast, the environmental sector tends to be rooted in the scientific and academic fields, with many practitioners entering via university-based pathways into research, policy, or advocacy. Though less structured than the agricultural pipeline, environmentally-centred professions similarly appeals to particular people and the loosely-formed sector has cultivated its own cultural and institutional norms over time.

Climate change is a crisis that we as a race have never had to deal with before. It is extremely difficult to change ways of working and whole systems, not least because to do so requires new skills and knowledge.

An agricultural lobby and policy interviewee noted that there was a race to increase the expertise within the representative organisation to be able to form an informed position on policy proposals related to conservation, biodiversity, soil and water, and that certain experts were being called on again and again. Since the policy making has been happening at such a pace, when there was a gap in knowledge internally, the automatic position to be taken on an agricultural proposal concerning the environment was "no". The urgent need for an increase in necessary knowledge and how it applies on the ground was also recognised by an interviewee from a leading independent environmental think tank. They observed that the general knowledge base at the regional and local level relating to biodiversity management, ecology, carbon emissions and sequestration needed to increase, and that policies designed at the EU level were stalling at the national and regional level often because the policy did not take into account the local specifics.

Across all interviewees, it was noted that it would be useful to have more people with expertise across sectors and disciplines, more "mixed profiles" who understand the three legs of farming sustainability stool (economic, social and environment), as well as the needs of healthy environment. See chapter four for this recommendation in more detail.

3.3 Beliefs (The shared beliefs, mindsets, attitudes, and values that create the system and how it operates)

Beliefs are at the base of all actions, and are shaped by multiple factors. We need to understand the beliefs, attitudes and values of anyone we want to work with, as well as critically assess our own in order to meet the tricky challenge of long-term food production.

The findings from the interviews show that we need more balanced media in which journalists reporting on food, land and farming issues must have a solid grounding in both environmental science and agricultural business. Our news sources are more and more disconnected and therefore it is even more important to meet people you disagree with in person, in non-confronting situations.

There is a belief that our agriculture in Europe is in a poor state. The chance to visit countries with different trade, governance, climate and income demonstrated to the author of this report that Europe is the world leader in sustainable agriculture, food chain safety, and labour laws, setting the standard for sustainable food production in other countries who export to Europe, and has been for some time. Improvement is also necessary in all areas, but travel outside of Europe puts our ambitions and our critiques into perspective.

It found that professional echo chambers exist, and that different visions had been built. Because of the low interaction between sectors and groups, there is low opportunity to explain the reasoning behind the visions. Certain terms in particular were contentious: "feeding the world" was seen as conflicting with meeting environmental and climate goals, while reclaiming "peasant" agriculture was a red flag and a sign of a material threat to farmers' existence. These differences can be stoked by outside influence, including funding from organisations outside of Europe. Case study four demonstrates a way to overcome us vs. them thinking.

It was also observed that because the conflict has become so defined and heated over the past years, sides are taken, everyone is on the defensive, and it is harder to hear the new ideas and proposals within one's own camp. Next generation farmers by their nature have new ideas and

viewpoints which are not often aired, due to lack of numbers and the importance of tradition in family farming. New ideas can enter the sector through non-farmers involved in the food chain, and wider land use professions, through platforms like the Irish Youth Food Forum and Macra, as well as through the creation of specific next-generation positions on boards and committees. AGRIAL, one of France's largest vertically integrated cooperative, has introduced a youth position to its board. The IFA and Dairygold are other examples of organisations taking proactive steps to platforming next generation voices. Case study three is an example of meaningful agri-food youth participation.

3.4 Case Studies

All around the world, examples were found of people who see the opportunity in working across lines, who want to move beyond the stalemate and towards a sustainable agriculture that works for everyone. The next section provides examples of workstreams where agriculture and environmental expertise are one and the same, the positive outcomes resulting from them and the risks avoided.

3.4.1 A Policy Alliance between Agriculture, Food and Climate

Benefits:

Coordinate policy positions, streamline policy adoption and implementation, ensure inclusion of agriculture in government climate funding.

Risks if not created:

A broken policy process that suits no one, agriculture left out of climate and nature funding. A recent example of this is nature restoration being left out of the Nature and Infrastructure fund (Dail Eireann 2025).

Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance: Overcoming Biases to Shape Policy

FACA is an alliance of USA farming, food and climate organisations working to get policies beneficial for farming and climate passed.

Set up in 2019, its members include the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Environmental Defence Fund, The Nature Conservancy and the Food industry Association, among others.

How it started

- FACA came out of a need to demonstrate the sustainability in agriculture. Social media meant that there were too many definitions of sustainability.
- Initially, all parties were apprehensive and there were clear cultural differences. Some of the members had had very little interaction with each other before this.
- Only organisations who were interested in getting things done and willing to come to a consensus were invited.
- "Conflict entrepreneurs" were avoided.
- The ground rules were set on day one: If we agree on 80% of things and disagree on 20%, focus on the 80%.
- It has worked because trust has begun to build over regular meetings and activities. Each member is beginning to seem more "human".

The impacts

1. It is easier to pick up the phone and check positions
2. There is less anxiety working together because you have trust
3. Positions and Policy proposals are stronger because they are better informed
4. Policy proposals are more likely to be adopted because they will not be immediately challenged by either side

FACA is likely to continue.

The lead instigator did not know why these organisations were separate in the first place but supposed that:

"It's easier to divide and point your finger, you feel good about it, but you don't get anything done…
Sometimes you have to do something uncomfortable to be able to move forward and be successful"

How to Start

1. Pick a simple shared goal and work on it together.
2. Celebrate the wins
3. Build relationship
4. Test appetite for bigger ambitions.

3.4.2 Being in the room for whole-of-government agri-environmental policy

Benefits: Denmark's largest agri-food industry lobby recognised that the country was headed towards agriculture emissions reduction, water quality and biodiversity regulations and it decided that it would actively take part in the policy creation process, rather than boycott it. The benefits of this is that the policy package contains compromises from all groups and is accepted by all parties, and the lobby can ensure that it is the best version for farmers.

Risks if not done: If policy creation happens without full buy in from all stakeholders, deadlock can occur, relationships break down, and it can be harder to move forward on multiple

fronts. We can take the challenges in the Netherlands since the introduction of the policy of taking farms out of production in 2022 as an example.

An example of agriculture and environmental collaboration in policymaking: Denmark's Green Tripartite for Agriculture.

On June 25th, 2024, the Danish government voted for the Green Tripartite agreement, a package designed by agricultural and nature representative organisations that includes an agricultural carbon tax. The agreement was so comprehensive that it puts Denmark in line to meeting its emissions reductions targets for the first time (Klimarådet 2025).

What is in the agreement and how is it to be implemented?

The ambition of the agreement is summarised by Niels Peter Nørring of the Danish Agriculture and Food Council (DAFC), Denmark's largest agri-food lobby, as
"More food production on less land" by "addressing GHG emissions, environment, nature, biodiversity and the future viability of Danish Agriculture" (Nørring 2024). DAFC emphasise that the aim is not to reduce livestock numbers but to reduce the climate impact of production (Nørring 2024).

The targets for 2035

1. 15% agricultural area set aside for nature
    a. 250000 hA of forest, 68% of which will be commercial harvest
    b. 140,000 hA of reclaimed wetland / marginal areas
2. Reduction in nitrogen emissions by 13,780 tonnes
3. CO2 emissions reductions are to contribute to Denmark's goal of 70% reduction on 1991 levels.

Action motivated by a combination of financial supports and taxes.

- Financial support for voluntary land use conversion, including afforestation, rewetting and land acquisition up until 2027, at which point a tax is launched.
- Tax on emissions of livestock, peatland, liming, f-gas. This tax income is directly invested into new food and agriculture technology.
- Tax for livestock is adjusted to omit unavoidable biogenic methane emissions. Current taxation level: 16 Euro per tonne starting in 2030, rising to 40 euro per tonne in 2035.

How will these targets be resourced?

- Reaching these targets is estimated to cost twenty billion euros.
- Six billion euros will be provided by the State from national income tax.
- Additional funding will be raised through public-private partnership, EU emissions trading system sales and CAP reallocation (pending EU approval).
- 10% of new forestry nearest urban centres will be funded directly by the local municipality.
- The fund will be operated by the Grøn Fond (Green Fund) of Denmark (State of Green 2024).

Implementation

- A new ministry and dedicated minister will be created.
- Municipalities are the main implementation partners and must produce a transition plan by end of 2025.
- For water targets, 23 local tripartites will be launched, comprising of municipalities, farmers and farm organisations, and environmental groups.

How was this agreement drafted and accepted?

What got people to the table was a combination of legal and public pressure. A series of laws were adopted between 2020 and 2025 committing Denmark to emissions reduction. The introduction of an agriculture carbon tax was included in the new government's mandate in 2022. Water quality became a public issue in the same timeframe, with public opinion pushing for harsher measures and drastic improvement of surface and groundwater quality.

At the table were the Danish government, the Danish Agriculture and Food Council (DAFC), the Danish Society for Nature Conservation (DSNC), labour unions, industry representatives and municipal authorities. The initial text was developed behind closed doors and then sent to parliament to debate and vote upon.

The method used for negotiation was a "tripartite" approach in which the two main representative organisations negotiate with the State (Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment 2025). Previously only used in Danish labour disputes, this is the first time the method has been used to address agriculture or environmental concerns.

Importantly, the three lead contributors, DAFC, the DSNC and the Danish government, all had an interest in its success. DAFC recognised that there was a risk of impossibly high Co2e tax and water regulations (Søndergaard 2024), the Danish Society for Nature Conservation was motivated by the

ongoing biodiversity crisis and the Danish government continues to weather a period of unpopularity as a novel centre government of three parties in coalition (Mindegaard 2024).

Challenges and Critiques

The agreement was voted on in Winter of 2024. 2025 is the first year to test the implementation plan and the fundraising approach. Possible challenges include the fall of the government in 2026, changes in availability of funding from CAP, carbon trading markets and public-private partnerships, low uptake of voluntary measures by farmers and competition for land use from housing developments in municipalities (Guldagger 2025).

The DAFC welcomes the agreement and is encouraging its farmer members to lead the change and get ahead of regulation by identifying areas for conservation and climate actions to adopt (Søndergaard 2024).

Other farmers representing smallholdings, rural associations and the youth, felt excluded from the process. Organic production featured in the plan only as a solution for marginal lands use, agroecology is deprioritised in favour of intensive production and space for nature. The agreement has not stopped nature advocacy (Bredsdorff 2025).

Summary

This agreement is an example of agriculture and environmental concerns coming together to arrive at a solution in which goals acceptable to both agendas are reached.

The conditions which made this agreement possible are 1) Denmark is a nation which is fiscally strong and can afford the creation of a "Green Fund" 2) Danish agriculture is also on the whole robust and can absorb the introduction of moderate taxes 3) Agriculture in Denmark is highly consolidated and corporate ownership is on the rise 4) There is a strong culture of political negotiation in Denmark.

Implementation is the next and often the hardest challenge, but the Green Tripartite agreement is a model that could be useful for collective buy-in into the direction of travel for agricultures emissions, nature, and biodiversity ambitions.

3.4.3 Next Generation Food and Farming Consultation

Benefits: Gain a deep understanding about what matters most to the next generation of people working in the food chain, create feelings of being listening to and increase engagement and buy-in.

Risks to not doing this: Sector does not adapt quick enough to remain attractive to the next generation and misses out on innovative ideas.

Asking the Next Generation what kind of agriculture they want: À la Rencontre des Jeunes 2023, La Coopération Agricole

This is an example of giving the right amount of resources, time and expertise to gather deep and wide enough data to then be able to take concrete action based on the findings. This is a powerful tool to encourage the next generation to think about cooperation and food security, as well as give them an experience of meaningful participation in their cooperative support network, increasing feelings of connection and the likelihood of a positive farm succession.

In 2023, La Cooperation Agricole launched its biggest youth (<40 years of age) consultation in decades. The aim was to get the youth perspective on the ongoing debates about the future CAP and the direction of agriculture.

#s

- 6 cities
- 96 young people interviewed, 50% from a farming background.
- 700 participants across 6 public meetings.
- 8 Themes: Health, Trust, Quality, Price, Food, Agriculture, Environment, Jobs.

Outcomes

A Youth Constitution
A Youth Delegation to the Annual National Congress

5 themes

1. Reconnect our production with our regions
2. Be able to be a farmer and food worker today and in the future
3. High quality food accessible to all
4. Food that is good for people, planet and animals
5. Take back power over our food together

This consultation was supported by a dedicated agency, The Grand Public, as well as graphic facilitators who captured the results of the meetings.

Available online at: https://www.lacooperationagricole.coop/sites/default/files/2024-05/Livret%20Jeunes%20La%20Coop%C3%A9ration%20Agricole%20-%20VF.pdf

Figure 3.3 Extract from process report, published early 2024.

3.4.4 Bring different viewpoints and expertise together

Benefits: All sides gain better understanding of each other's position, laying the ground for future collaboration and improving public discourse.

Risks if not done: Groups continue to make ill-informed public statements that generate frustration and feelings of unfairness.

<u>Workshop: Sustainable Communities: Sustainable Farming Within an Intensive Farming System</u>

This workshop was designed with a national milk suppliers representative body during the Autumn Sustainable Development Goals Stakeholder Forum hosted by the Department of the Environment, Climate Change and Communications in 2024.

Aim

Share lived experience of being a full-time dairy farmer today in rural Ireland, give an insight into the daily management challenges of farming and what motivates a farmer to adopt environmental measures on farm.

Show that it is possible to farm in tune with biodiversity, water quality and still turn a profit, and that some can do without incentives, others need a helping hand

Methods

1. Bias Check.

Instruction: respond to this statement in writing by yourself.
"Challenges to sustainable farming in Ireland are…"

2. Brainstorming as a group:

a) What are outside and inside of a farmer's control?
b) How can community support farmers?

Attendees

15 attended. Profiles ranged from DECC employee, youth climate activist, Teagasc employee, Talamh Beo representative, and others.

Outcome

Youth Climate Activist shared she now has a better appreciation for the challenges on-farm that might get in the way of changing practices.

Figure 3.4 Photographs from the workshop, SDG Stakeholder Forum, Dublin, October 2024.

3.4.5 Peer-led Network for Progressive Agriculture Practice

Benefits: Peer support for trying new innovations on farm and with the farm business.

Risks if not done: Farmers feel less supported to try new things or adopt new practices, relating to environmental outcomes or otherwise.

Ag Edge New South Wales: On-the-Ground peer network for progressive family farm businesses.

Collaboration can be the most effective through peer-to-peer networks. This is an example of a "discussion group" type organisation in New South Wales, Eastern Australia, which focuses on business supports and owner motivations, and can provide strong supports for taking risks and new challenges, such as agri-environmental practices, in the farm business.

Figure 3.5 AgEdge Members, October 2024.

Ag Edge is an invite-only not for profit peer network operated by members to provide a place to exchange best practices, hold accountability and find support for business challenges. It was established in 1993.

All farm partners join, including spouses.

Meetings are periodical, every other month, and roles rotate in the group.

Reasons to join include:

- Business strategizing, including benchmarking
- Expert advice
- An opportunity to form alliances, partnerships or joint ventures
- A space to set goals and be held accountable to them.

Feedback from a participant is positive:

- It helps me to think of my farm more like a business.
- It is a community who cheer me on which I feel part of
- I am more likely to work hard for my goals knowing that the whole group will ask about them next time we meet.

Chapter 4 Summary and Recommendations

This report has looked at how collaboration is or is not happening between organisations working in and regulating agriculture and land use. The report is based on international travels through the Nuffield network: 22 interviews were carried out with people from government, farming unions, NGOs, and policy groups. Using the "iceberg model," it explores both the visible conflicts and the deeper causes of poor communication between organisations. The report then highlights real-world examples of innovative collaboration and what can be learned from them.

The main finding is that there is a false binary between agriculture and environmental concerns and an "us vs them" framing is limiting agricultural innovation and creating regulatory deadlock. Our ability to work together is held back by long-standing structural, cultural, and communication barriers. These challenges can be addressed through changes in how policy is made, how professionals are trained, and how the public conversation is framed

4.1 Key Findings

4.1.1 Trends

Over the past ten years, relations between farming and environmental groups in Ireland and across Europe have become more tense. A few main patterns explain why:

- **Protests and Policy Tensions:** Farmers have protested against what they see as excessive regulation and lack of consultation, especially around the EU's Green Deal and new CAP rules. The withdrawal of the EU's pesticide reduction proposal in 2023 was a key moment that showed how divided the debate has become.
- **More Environmental NGOs:** There are now many more environmental NGOs involved in agricultural policy. This has helped raise awareness of climate and biodiversity issues, but it has also created friction. Some farming groups feel that these NGOs don't understand how farms actually work.
- **Changing Rural Demographics:** Rural depopulation, farm mergers, and an aging farmer population mean fewer young people are involved in decision-making. Many younger farmers, busy with work and family, have less time to take part in farming unions or policy discussions.

- **Loss of Trust:** Media coverage often presents farming and environmentalism as being on opposite sides. This fuels defensiveness and makes it harder to find common ground.

As a result, there are more and more competing ideas about what the future of food production should look like — but less agreement on how to get there.

4.1.2 Structural Issues

Government systems add to the problem. In Ireland, responsibility for agriculture, environment, and climate is split across several departments that are located in different buildings. This makes coordination slow and difficult. Civil servants who work side-by-side in Brussels report far better cooperation.

In other countries, some governments have merged agricultural and environmental departments (for example, Denmark), or at least included environmental goals in department names and missions (like France). Ireland, Australia, and Japan have not done this, suggesting the environment may not yet be a central focus in agricultural policy.

Ireland's agri-food system is very interconnected — government, research bodies, and industry groups work closely together. Supporters say this helps get things done, but critics say it can make the system resistant to outside environmental input. A better balance between economic and environmental priorities is needed.

4.1.3 Professional Pathways

Farmers and environmental professionals often come from very different backgrounds. Farming is passed down through families and is rooted in hands-on experience, while environmental careers usually begin in universities through scientific or policy training. Because of this, there are few people who understand both sides.

Interviewees said there is a shortage of experts who can bridge these gaps — people who understand both ecology and farm economics. At local and regional levels, this lack of expertise slows down the implementation of EU environmental policies.

4. 1.4 Beliefs and Attitudes

People's beliefs strongly influence how they act. The study found that:

- Farmers often see environmental campaigners as unrealistic and disconnected from rural life.
- Environmentalists often see farmers as resistant to change.

These views are made worse by social media and biased reporting. But when people meet face-to-face — for example, on farm visits or in joint workshops — they usually find more common ground.

Interviewees who had worked or travelled abroad noticed that Europe already leads the world in sustainable food production. Reframing the conversation as one of progress, not failure, could help reduce hostility.

A key issue is the lack of young voices. Many younger farmers feel excluded from leadership roles, but where youth seats on boards have been introduced (as in AGRIAL, IFA, and Dairygold), it has brought fresh ideas and better communication between sectors.

4.2 Seven Routes to Productive Action

4.2.1 Foster Institutional Co-location and Cross-departmental Secondments

To overcome structural silos between agricultural and environmental departments, institutional arrangements that promote proximity and informal exchange should be expanded. The co-location model observed in the Irish Permanent Representation in Brussels demonstrates that physical proximity facilitates trust-building, rapid alignment, and nuanced policy development. It is recommended that similar co-working initiatives be piloted in Dublin between DAFM and DCEE, potentially through shared spaces, joint taskforces, or rotational placements. Moreover, expanding the rotation of civil servants between DG AGRI and DGs ENV / CLIMA and others (and their Irish counterparts) would promote mutual understanding and policy coherence.

4.2.2 Expand and Resource Place-Based Collaboration Models

The success of integrated, place-based initiatives such as the river basin management approach and the ASSAP advisory service underscores the value of localised, multi-actor collaboration. These models allow for the co-design of solutions that reflect both environmental targets and farming realities. Scaling such initiatives will require sustained investment, institutional support, and formalised

mechanisms to embed them into mainstream agricultural policy delivery. For example, the *Water Action Plan 2024* includes twelve specific agricultural measures linked to water quality, including the new water EIP to be led by LAWPRO (Government of Ireland, 2024). Particular attention should be paid to replicating the conditions that have enabled trust and cooperation, such as continuity of personnel, community leadership, and accessible facilitation.

4.2.3 Develop Joint Agricultural-Environmental Pipelines and Education Pathways

Cultural divisions between agriculture and environment are, in part, a function of how professionals are trained and socialised into their respective fields. Establishing joint educational programs—such as dual degrees, interdisciplinary modules, or shared field placements—could foster a generation of professionals equipped to work across traditional boundaries. These programs should be developed in partnership with academic institutions, professional bodies, and government agencies, with the goal of creating shared competencies and values around sustainability, systems thinking, and collaborative governance.

4.2.4 Reinvigorate Representative Organisations Through Generational Inclusion

The declining participation of next-generation farmers in traditional representative organisations poses a risk to the legitimacy and responsiveness of those bodies. To ensure that farmer representation reflects the diversity of farming perspectives—including those committed to agroecology or sustainability—organisations such as the IFA must make active efforts to restructure their internal governance. This may include establishing youth councils, implementing term limits for board members, and offering flexible and accessible meeting formats. Lessons may be drawn from models like AGRIAL's dedicated youth board position in France.

4.2.5 Incentivise Cross-sectoral Dialogue Through Professional Recognition

Bridging cultural divides requires not only structural interventions but also symbolic ones. Creating awards, professional development credits, or public recognition for individuals or organisations that engage in effective cross-sectoral collaboration could help normalise and incentivise integrative work. This might include collaborative research projects, innovative advisory models, or multi-

stakeholder planning processes. Over time, such initiatives can contribute to a new professional norm that values co-production and interdependence.

4.2.6 Support Independent, Cross-sectoral Media and Communication Platforms

Media narratives significantly influence public perception and policy framing. Currently, agriculture is often portrayed within environmental journalism without sufficient contextual knowledge, while farmers may distrust mainstream environmental messaging. Supporting independent platforms that centre balanced reporting and dialogue across sectors could help counteract misrepresentation and polarisation. This could take the form of farmer–scientist podcasts, collaborative opinion editorials, or joint media training initiatives.

4.2.7 Build Long-term Trust Through Sustained Forums and Shared Governance

Finally, the importance of trust cannot be overstated. Successful examples like the Irish Water Forum demonstrate that when trust is built over time, it becomes possible to manage disagreement constructively and develop shared goals. It is recommended that government and civil society invest in long-term governance structures—such as advisory councils, learning networks, or permanent stakeholder assemblies—that bring together agricultural and environmental actors in recurring, facilitated dialogue. These structures should be designed not only for consultation but for shared decision-making.

Several examples show how cooperation can work when designed well:

- **Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (USA):** Brings together farm and environmental groups around shared agri-environmental goals.
- **Denmark's Green Tripartite Agreement:** Puts farmers, industry, and government at the same table to agree on sustainability measures.
- **Australia's AgEdge and Ireland's Sustainable Communities projects:** Show that local, community-led efforts can balance productivity with environmental care.

These success stories have key things in common: early consultation, staff working side by side, cross-sector expertise, and clear accountability for results.

4.3 Conclusion

The biggest obstacle to progress isn't disagreement about goals — it's the lack of shared spaces where people can actually work together. Physical distance between departments, professional silos, and polarized media all make it harder to cooperate.

But these barriers can be overcome. When people share offices, rotate across departments, include younger voices, and have open discussions based on shared data, conflict turns into collaboration.

Ireland and Europe stand at a crossroads: sustaining productivity and environmental integrity will require reframing agriculture and environment as interdependent systems rather than competing mandates. Building an "agri-environmental alliance" rooted in dialogue, data, and shared accountability could shift the narrative from blame to partnership—turning conflict into a resource for innovation, resilience, and long-term food security.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. What is unique about <name of organisation>?
2. Who are your closest collaborators?
3. What government bodies do you engage with?
4. *(if not a farmer-led organisation):* How often do you engage with farmer organisations and in what ways?

5. How do you build strategy and decide priorities?
6. What is success for you?
7. What have been unexpected wins / areas of alignment?
8. Can you share a time when your theory of change was disproven?
9. What else has to change?
10. What is the mood, how are you feeling?
11. Where is opportunity, hope?
12. What is your biggest area of impact?
13. What are the different things that could change that would bring about the same result?

Appendix 2: List of Conferences Attended

Name	**Location**
2nd European Carbon Farming Summit	Ireland
Changing Landscapes, Hoometree	Ireland
Organic Growers Ireland Conference	Ireland
Feeding Ourselves	
52nd Committee on World Food Security	Rome

3rd World Food Forum	Rome
Oxford Real Farming Conference	UK, online
Groundswell Regenerative Agriculture Festival	UK

Plain English Compendium Summary

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Objectives	Main Research Questions 1. What causes unproductive dialogue amongst all organisations working in agriculture and the environment? 2. What is preventing greater collaboration earlier? 3. What are routes to productive action? Research Objectives 1. Examine the current relationship between Irish agriculture and environmental sectors, knowledge and actions. 2. Explore what beliefs underpin current behaviours. 3. Gather international examples of high level collaboration as well as on-the-ground initiatives. 4. Provide analysis and recommendations.
Background Research	A snapshot of the trends, structures and beliefs is captured in a key location of influence, Brussels, as well as at home, through interviews and site visits. Examples of unlikely collaborations are taken from Denmark, France, Australia and the USA.
Outcomes	The main finding is that there is a false binary between agriculture and environmental concerns and an "us vs them" framing is limiting agricultural innovation and creating regulatory deadlock. Our ability to work together is held back by long-standing structural, cultural, and communication barriers. These challenges can be addressed through changes in how policy is made, how professionals are trained, and how the public conversation is framed. The paper outlines practical ways forward: • **Shared Spaces:** Proximity builds trust. Dublin could replicate Brussels, where agricultural and environmental staff work side-by-side. • **Education and Cross-Training:** Farmers could learn more about climate science, and policymakers about the economics of farming. A skills audit could guide this.

	• **Youth and New Platforms:** Initiatives like a Youth Food Forum or mixed advisory boards could bring new energy and better dialogue. • **Local Action:** Projects like river basin management show that community-led collaboration can overcome national-level barriers. • **Neutral Facilitators:** Organisations like Farming for Nature, trusted by both sides, can help bridge the divide using science-based, balanced approaches.
Implications	More alliances, working groups and collaborations that avoid "conflict entrepreneurs" and focus on getting things do.