

Developing organic production in Northern Ireland

David G Alexander

Organic Development Adviser, Greenmount College, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

The area of land under organic management in Northern Ireland has increased from 215 ha in January 1998 to 5,000 ha in December 2001. The Minister for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has set a target for organic farming of 30,000 ha by 2006 and also commissioned an independent study of the strategic needs for developing the Northern Ireland organic sector in 2000. Greenmount College have taken the decision to establish an organic unit to support these DARD initiatives for organic farming and implement key recommendations from the strategy. The College has also initiated a project to gather and analyse data from 45 organic and in-conversion farms over a three-year period. This data will be used to benchmark organic production and assist with conversion and development of the sector.

Keywords: organic farming; conversion; Northern Ireland

INTRODUCTION

The area of land under organic management in Northern Ireland has increased to 5,000 ha in December 2001 and the Minister for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has set a target for organic farming of 30,000 ha by 2006. It has also commissioned an independent study of the strategic needs for developing the Northern Ireland organic sector. The proposed action plan includes the establishment of a demonstration farm network, and a targeted Research and Development programme to provide sound technical and economic information on the operation and management of organic systems in the specific conditions of Northern Ireland.

ECONOMIC STUDY

In 2001, Greenmount College initiated the 'Economic Model for Organic Farming' project to gather and analyse data from 45 organic and in-conversion farms over a three-year period. This data will be used to construct a computerised modelling tool for farm planning and decision-making, and to benchmark the local organic sector. In addition the farmers and growers have been encouraged to use ICT for record keeping, obtain knowledge via the Internet and exchange ideas by e-mail through on-line discussion groups.

ORGANIC PRODUCTION UNIT

Greenmount College has also taken the decision to establish an organic unit to support these DARD initiatives for organic farming and implement key recommendations from the strategy.

The organic production unit is intended to: (1) to demonstrate the practices and principles of organic production to farmers, students, advisers and members of the general public using a balanced combination of complimentary livestock and crop enterprises; (2) be an education and training resource for practical tuition and project based learning by both students and staff; (3) be a source of production information and financial data for benchmarking and technology transfer work and (4) be a resource for DARD staff and students to carry out research and development work.

The unit is 36 ha in size. The unit will support various enterprises including suckler beef and sheep production with arable crops, potatoes and vegetables. A small poultry enterprise accommodated in mobile houses will also be established. The land is not all of good quality and includes 11 ha of low-lying meadows. Maintaining good clover swards on this land may be difficult but would reflect the challenges faced by many other Northern Ireland farmers. This will limit the land suitable to be included in arable rotations. The grazing season will also be shorter than on some other land. Existing farm buildings will require modification. It is anticipated that the land will achieve organic status in Spring 2004. During the next six months an environmental audit of the unit will be undertaken and a farm bio-diversity and environmental plan drawn up.

Sufficient cereals (oats, barley and triticale) will be grown to meet the feed requirements of the stock. Alternative forages and protein crops will also be grown in order that the unit should be as sustainable as possible. The majority of grassland areas will need clover introduced during the 2002 growing season. Clover will be stitched-in between June and mid August, to avoid peak growth of grass and leave time for full establishment. Improved swards will also be evaluated and include red clover/Italian ryegrass/hybrid ryegrass.

The unit will be stocked with 20 spring calving suckler cows. Replacements will be bred and retained within the herd and the remaining progeny finished as organic beef. A criss-cross breeding programme will be used alternating between traditional and Continental breeds. A flock of 60 breeding ewes will be established using the Lleyn breed which will be suitable to breed pure either in a self-contained flock or to breed some ewes pure and cross breed the remainder of the flock to a good terminal sire.