

Introduction and Background

Regan Organic Produce Ltd is based on a farm of approximately 17 ha, 6Km from Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford in the south east of Ireland.

It's a small family run business with a mixture of enterprises including organic chickens and pigs; ducks and turkeys (seasonally), duck and hen eggs and a small suckler cow herd. A small area of cereals is also grown.

The total land area occupied by organic farming in Ireland is very small at less than 2%. There are two governing bodies responsible for organic farming, one is Organic Trust which has about 600 members at present and of which we are members since 2006. The second is IOFGA (Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association) and which has approximately 1200 members.

The highest proportions of organic farms are in the west of Ireland where farm sizes tend to be smaller and land quality is poorer.

In this paper I will outline each enterprise in some detail with an emphasis on feeding and breeds used etc.

Organic Chickens

The production of oven ready organic chicken is the main enterprise on the farm. Chickens are bought in at one day old from the main hatchery, Anayalla in Co. Monaghan (1 of 2 hatcheries in the Republic of Ireland, the other is in Co. Cork). A commercial hybrid breed Ross is currently used. There are a few reasons for this. The only other breed that is now readily available is the Hubbard. Whilst this is a hardier bird and we did try this breed in the past, we found it had a poorer feed conversion and didn't have that same depth of meat on the breast as the Ross. Our presence at Farmers Markets and direct selling to the customer meant that we were able to get some feedback from them and the result was that our customers had become accustomed to the deep breasted bird and found it good value for money and flavoursome.



The Ross birds free range well especially in the summer but to a lesser extent in the winter.

So from an economical point of view the Ross was the better option at

the time and secondly they are more available for purchase on a regular basis. (When we tried Hubbard they were not always available when necessary).

That is the situation at present, however, that is not to say that we will not try this breed again especially if there is a reduction in the cost of feed. Sasso is a breed that we were also interested in looking at but chicks are not available here and couriers will not take eggs into the country from the UK for hatching!

Our birds are kept in groups up to a maximum of 800. The day old birds are kept in brooder houses heated by gas brooders and wood shavings are used for bedding. They remain here until they are 4 weeks old (or sometimes 3 during the summer). At this stage they are fully feathered and are moved to straw bedded houses where they have access to outdoors to grass, clover, grubs etc.

Currently a two stage feeding regime is used. The young chicks are started on a 22% crude protein chick starter crumb. This is mixed with the grower/finisher for a few days when the birds are 3.5 to 4 weeks old and then they are fed on the grower/finisher pellet. This is about 19% crude protein.

Birds are often fed our own home grown cereal for the last 2 weeks if they have reached the required weight.

There is no feed company in Ireland manufacturing a compound/ pelleted feed for organic poultry (or any other species either).

A company called E Morrin and Son based in Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow did originally manufacture organic compounds but have since has contracted the business to a company based in Holland. The feed is still sold as Morrins but manufactured in Holland.

Some of our feed is bought from this company. Fishmeal is not used in any of its feed. The other feed options available are to import from the UK. The company that we use at present in the UK is Vitrition. They provide a range of organic feed. The problem with importing from the UK is the vulnerability from exposure to currency fluctuations coupled with high transport costs related to the high diesel prices experienced. The high transport cost is also associated with Morrins feed.

Vitrition use fishmeal but in Ireland there are strict regulations in place by the Department of Agriculture in relation to the use of fishmeal and this is especially the case when ruminants are present on the farm. One must be registered as an importer on a Department list and feed coming onto the farm containing fishmeal must be stored in a lockable shed and stored away from ruminant feed and separate feeding utensils used etc. to prevent any chance of cross contamination of feed.

This poses problems for us due to the presence of the ruminants and the fact that we are small scale operators with limited facilities for storage etc. on the farm. As a result we have asked Vitrition to omit the fishmeal from their grower/finisher feed and we buy the starter crumb from Morrins.

We have also used another UK based company called HiPeak in the past but changed to Vitrition due to a better pricing arrangement.

We do experience problems with chickens growing too big at times. This is more common during the summer months when day length is longer and birds perform better in the warmer weather. We aim to produce chickens ranging in weight from 1.7 kg to 2.2 kg (oven ready) at 11.5 weeks plus. (Chickens are only bought every 3 weeks due to housing limitations etc.).

To help reduce this problem to some degree we introduce our own cereal or cereal mix at 9 to 10 weeks depending on size. The mix consists of either our own cereals or locally sourced organic pea/wheat/ barley mixes (cereal production will be dealt with later in the paper).

We did have our own mill on the farm but it was damaged in a fire and not replaced to date. The mixing is now done by a local contractor who uses a mobile mixer. Mixing our own feed can provide savings of up to 80 euro per ton.

The biggest problem with producing a complete own home grown mix is the protein source. Organic soya must be imported and it is expensive. Apart from soya other protein sources that are grown here are peas, beans, lupins and rapeseed (on a small scale). None of these would have the capability of replacing soya in the diet of young chickens.

One crop that could have great potential in this area would be hemp and it's a crop that we are very interested in looking at with the intent of producing in the future our own feed on the farm for feeding to our stock (more details in tillage section).

This would provide a complete traceable product for the consumer. It would form part of a sustainable production system with a lower cost of production and we would have more control over our feed costs which is our biggest cost on the farm.

The introduction of the 100% organic feed raw materials requirement proposed for 2012 would not be seen in my opinion as a hindrance.

There are adequate quantities of organic raw materials being produced and secondly there can be no anomalies from a consumer point of view.

In summary, the balance is between a personal preference of what I believe to be "true organic" and economics.

Although at present we are using a hybrid strain of bird other aspects of our farming system is definitely "truly organic" in so far as we are small, our flock sizes are small so welfare and management of the birds is top priority (birds can form their own

social groups and range better) , we produce some of our own feed on the farm and source more as locally as possible and we intend on doing more of this and hopefully including hemp in our crops grown to provide an alternative protein source.

Tillage

The farm is well suited to the production of a range of cereals including wheat, oats, barley and Triticale due to its light to medium type free draining soil.

All of the above crops have been grown successfully along with peas.

About 5.5ha of tillage is grown annually and another 5ha grown on contract for us by a local organic producer .about 12km away. This cooperation between farmers must be encouraged because apart from Flahavans who make organic porridge oat lets, a breakfast cereal and who offer contracts to farmers to grow oats, there is no other large cereal buyer in the country most cereals grown are either used on the farm or sold to other farmers for feeding. The presence of a commercial cereal buyer would be an encouragement for other farmers to convert to organic cereal production as it would provide an outlet for the produce. As stated earlier, hemp is of particular interest to us as a very good quality source of protein. In the spring of 2010 hemp trials were carried out on the farm in conjunction with Green Hemp Ltd. One acre was subdivided into smaller plots and six varieties were grown. Three of these were Canadian (Carmen, Anka and Jutta) and 2 European (Finola, USO 31, and Futura).

However, the results were disappointing. Weeds were very competitive with the crops. I think that some of the problem was due to soil management as the ground was treated as it would have been for the preparation of cereals. The crop is very susceptible to compaction and to soil nutrient levels. It was a learning experience!

This however will not deter me from continuing to look at hemp and its use on my farm. No trials were carried out this year due to the late arrival of the seed.

Pigs

Pigs are a relatively new enterprise on the farm, having started with a few weaners in 2009. Our female breeding sows are Tamworths and we use a Gloucester Old Spot boar. These are traditional outdoor



breeds. We find them hardy and good mothers.

Pigs mostly graze areas of grass due for reseeded. When pigs have finished grazing a particular grass area a tillage crop is sown for 2 years and then put back into grass/clover mix. Pigs are fed on similar feed to the chickens with a lot of our own mix fed from about 2 weeks post weaning which is normally at 10 weeks. Most of the finished pigs are sold live to another organic producer who butchers them for sale at farmers markets. The remaining pigs are either kept for our own freezer use, sold to a butcher or to a local hotel. Finished pigs produce a good fat to lean ratio of meat and are good for pork and bacon.

Unfortunately the organic pig sector is not well developed in this country but consists of a small number of producers who go out and seek their own markets for their produce. There are no buyers or factory that kills or has a market to supply organic pigs to any retail outlets at present.

Again this is something that may be addressed in the future to encourage the growth of the sector.

Cows



A small herd of 10 cows are kept on the farm. The cows are either Aberdeen Angus or Hereford. Both are traditional breeds and very much in vogue in restaurants and butcher shops etc. at present.

An Aberdeen Angus bull is used. Calves are polled so that's one less job to do. The calves are hardy and finish young. Unlike the pigs there are a few factories that buy organic cattle. Slaney Meats in Co. Wexford is one and Good Herdsmen in

Tipperary is another. Aberdeen Angus cattle are docile, easy to manage and low maintenance animals and are well suited to a low input system. This summer all of the previous calves finished off the grass/ clover swards at 15 to 17 months. No meal was fed to them just baled grass/ clover silage.

Hens and ducks

We keep a small flock of laying hens and ducks for egg production. Our hen eggs are sold directly from the farm through our "Honesty Box Scheme". This works well for us in so far as that people can come get their eggs and leave the money and it doesn't impact on our farm duties. There are a lot of regulations in place in relation to selling eggs into shops (eggs must be graded, stamped and come from a registered packing centre etc.). The same rules do not pertain to direct farm selling of eggs. The breeds of laying hens that we use are the traditional Bluebell, Light Sussex, Marran and Blackrock and they were reared on the farm from day olds.

Duck eggs are sold through the box scheme but also to shops in Dublin and through Farmers Markets. We have two breeds of ducks, Alysbury and Khaki Campell.

A compound feed of layers pellets is bought from Morrins for feeding. To both hens and ducks.