

MEETING OF THE JOINT OIREACTHAS COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

20 February 2008

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The joint committee met in private session at 11.40 a.m. and resumed in public session at 11.50 a.m.

1. Farmers' Markets: Discussion with Minister of State [p. 2]

2. Genetically Modified Foods: Discussion with Minister of State [p. 15]

The Joint Committee met at 11.40 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Senator Paul Bradford (Fine Gael)

Senator John Carty (Fianna Fáil)

Deputy Bobby Aylward (Fianna Fáil)

Deputy Michael Creed (Fine Gael)

Deputy Andrew Doyle (Fine Gael)

Deputy Martin Ferris (Sinn Féin)

Deputy Thomas McEllistrim (Fianna Fáil)

Deputy Mattie McGrath (Fianna Fáil)

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan (Fianna Fáil)

Deputy Eamon Scanlon (Fianna Fáil)

Deputy Tom Sheahan (Fine Gael)

Deputy P. J. Sheehan (Fine Gael)

Deputy Seán Sherlock (Labour Party)

DEPUTY JOHNNY BRADY IN THE CHAIR (Fianna Fáil)

FARMERS MARKETS: DISCUSSION WITH MINISTER OF STATE

Chairman: I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Deputy Sargent, to the committee. He always attended this committee on any issues that concerned him when he was in Opposition. I wish him many years in his new post. The committee initially invited him to discuss the issue of farmers' markets. However, following a meeting we had a few weeks ago with officials on the issue of genetically modified organisms, some issues arose. We have taken the opportunity to add the issue of GMOs to the agenda today and hope the Minister of State does not mind.

I propose we hear the Minister of State's presentation on farmers' markets and follow it with a question and answer session. Following that, I propose we move on to the issue of GMOs where the same procedure will apply. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Trevor Sargent):

Go raibh míle maith agat. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Cathaoirleach agus an coiste as ucht an cuireadh teacht anseo. Seo an chéad uair dom a bheith os comhair an choiste agus táim ag súil go mór leis. Tá súil agam freisin go mbeidh seansanna eile agam a bheith anseo. Tá aithne mhaith agam ar na daoine atá anseo ó na díospóireachtaí a bhí againn i dtaobh talmhaíocht agus rudaí eile le tamall anuas. My officials are here with me and I hope we will be able to answer any questions that arise. In any event, I hope my presentation will cover most of the questions. Any remaining queries will then be addressed.

I welcome the opportunity to address the committee on the issue of farmers' markets. One of our commitments under the programme for Government is the encouragement of more direct selling from farmer to customer by restoring and promoting a national network of farmers' markets. The local food concept, although relatively new to Ireland compared with some of our European counterparts, is fast becoming an integral part of the weekly shop. The number of markets describing themselves as farmers' markets is increasing and now more than 130 public, private and community markets operate in Ireland.

Experience of farmers' markets, farm shops and box schemes, suggests they can provide economic, environmental and social benefits, locally and regionally. These benefits include access to in-season quality fresh food; fewer air miles and, therefore, reduced carbon footprints; more money circulating in local economies; increased employment regionally; the preservation of regional specialties; and an enhanced level of choice for consumers.

The development of new and shorter routes to market, such as the phenomenon of farmers' markets, which continue to grow in popularity throughout the country, has greatly encouraged on-farm production of high quality specialist food. The opportunities offered by the decoupled payment system also will encourage many farmers to look at the speciality sector as a way of adding value at the farm gate.

The contribution of local authorities is key to the success of the local food concept, not least in the area of farmers' markets. The local authority farmers' market forum, which I hosted in January, brought together mayors, local authority managers, cathaoirleach of special policy committees and town clerks for a dialogue on direct routes to market for local food, with a particular focus on farmers' markets. I was very pleased that all counties were represented among the 115 delegates. The specific aims of the event were to raise awareness among local authority decision makers as to the benefits a farmers' market could bring to their area and to highlight areas where the local authority can assist. I can let members have documentation on the proceedings if required.

The event featured speakers from France and the UK, who provided an insight into the how and why of markets in their countries. Case studies were carried out of Irish market experiences and planning in Middleton, Cahir, Dublin and Limerick. At the forum, I impressed on local authorities, which have powers under the Casual Trading Act, the need for running water and power points to be available at markets. I want to promote a level of consistency for all local authorities dealing with farmers' markets.

The recent consultation with local authorities followed on from the national conference on local food, which I hosted in Mullingar in November, and where the Bord Bia guide to selling through farmers' markets, farm shops and box schemes in Ireland was launched. Distribution difficulties had been flagged at the earlier regional food forums held by Bord Bia and my Department. The Bord Bia guide presents information and advice in a concise, easy-to-use format, with step-by-step action plans and useful checklists on what is involved.

The conference was the first national conference on local food and it aimed to raise awareness and understanding of local food as defined by the consumer, highlight the benefits to producers, retailers and the consumer and offer practical information and advice on selling locally. More than 250 producers, retailers, consumers and agency personnel attended.

A number of surveys have been conducted on the local impact from farmers' markets. Farmers' markets can have a beneficial impact on local businesses and the community in general. Research from Bord Bia has shown that €10 spent at a farmers' market will result in a net income of €24 for the community. It has been estimated also that trade for other businesses increases by up to 30% when a market is run in a town. I have seen for myself the increased foot fall resulting on market day.

The specialty sector, including artisan and organic products, is growing at 10% per annum, fuelled by consumers seeking variety, well-being, provenance and taste. Consumer protection and consumer confidence are essential elements in the development of farmers' markets and other direct selling routes to market. More recently, the Department has surveyed farmers' markets on their requirements to have up-to-date information to assist with future initiatives.

I recently chaired an expanded artisan industry committee, under the auspices of the Department's AgriVision 2015 action plan, which identifies the delivery of safe, high-quality, nutritious food, produced in a sustainable manner in high value markets as the optimum route for the future of the Irish food industry. The group is representative of the diverse artisan sector and includes the chair of the Irish Food Market Traders Association.

Organic issues are very relevant to farmers' markets as certified organic farmers see farmers' markets as their route to market. The importance of farmers' markets is recognised in the organic marketing development plan, which is funded by my Department. In our programme for Government, we have pledged to increase the land area under organic production to 5% of total agricultural area by 2012. As demand for fresh local and organic produce grows, so do opportunities for local producers. The Irish organic retail market was estimated to be worth €66 million last year, compared with €38 million in 2003. I saw a figure of €400 million projected for 2012, so it is growing considerably. In markets, organic stallholders are generally in a minority at present. We have increased the resources deployed to safeguard the integrity of organic products and provided greater powers for Department officials through SI 698 of 2007 amending SI 112 of 1994, implementing EU organic rules.

I will now summarise future prospects. Accelerating changes in agriculture have significantly changed the rural economy. Farming is now more consumer and market oriented. Producers, large and small, have increasingly to consider the best route to market for their own businesses. For many small producers in particular, farmers' markets are providing the route to market and in doing so are performing a new role in supplementing farm income. In this regard, farmers' markets are the perfect vehicle for satisfying the demands of two separate groups within our

communities, consumers who are increasingly looking for freshly produced local food and producers looking for a local market to sell their produce. Farmers' markets are uniquely placed to complement the demands of these two groups.

One of our biggest challenges will be to ensure a level of consistency between the different farmers' markets while allowing individual markets to keep their own identity. To achieve this, all of the major players will need to come together. These include the following: the producers who have a responsibility to display and label products in a clear and unambiguous way, for example claiming that produce is organic means displaying organic certification; the consumer who should be satisfied as to the origin and quality of product before purchase; the local authorities which should provide adequate facilities; and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which will play a key role in developing farmers' markets and providing forums and opportunities for all of the players to come together.

Following the forum I have consulted with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, whose Department has responsibility for the Casual Trading Acts, regarding the possibility of guidelines in this area. Our plan is to have draft guidelines drawn up by a cross-departmental group to ensure a joined-up approach and to proceed then to an open consultation with a range of interests. There is a range of views on the best approach with very different views on whether to have regulation or codes of practice. I believe we should seek consensus on what is practical and achievable and within the scope of local authorities to influence. As I mentioned, we had French and English delegates over here and I was impressed by how they have had farmers' markets established for some time and the local authorities seem to be on board.

I have long been an advocate of farmers' markets. Every good-sized town should have one as part of its food experience. In a direct way markets can also keep us in touch with the seasonality of nature and the taste of fresh local food. A joined-up approach across Departments, agencies and local authority policymakers provides a good prospect for strengthening the growth, viability and prosperity of farmers' markets in Ireland.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for his presentation.

Deputy Michael Creed: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Sargent, and thank him for his presentation. While I do not intend to comment on it, I wish to ask a question arising from my previous experience as a local authority member for many years.

The farmers' market experience and presentation on the continent is far more positive. I suspect that local authorities play a very significant role in facilitating that through the provision of water on site, trading bays and other necessary supports. Given that local authorities have limited financial resources if we are to require them to provide such supports, some thought needs to be given to cost implications and how that will be funded. Obviously some of the costs need to be borne by those who are trading and benefiting. Otherwise it will fall exclusively on ratepayers in local authorities. It would be ironic if ratepayers, operating just off the street and in many ways competing with them, would subsidise farmers' markets. While I support the principle of farmers' markets, I am anxious that the funding mechanism for the improved presentation of farmers' markets does not fall unduly on the rate base in the area. If the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is leading this initiative it should give consideration to how it will be financed before obliging local authorities to respond.

Deputy Seán Sherlock: I welcome the Minister of State. I must compliment him for succeeding in putting this issue on the political agenda, which I welcome, because it gives recognition to it as a sector of our economy with great potential to add value to local communities.

There are a number of farmers' markets in my constituency, including the one in Midleton, to which I am a regular visitor. As they are by their nature organic in their organisation, with local people coming together to sell their produce, I would not favour any mechanism that would overregulate farmers' markets. Much can be done to provide resources, including water and

electricity supply if needs be. However, they should not be overregulated regarding, for example, apples needing to be measured or have the dirt cleaned off them. The duck eggs I buy from Castlelyons market on a Saturday morning should not need to be regulated to a degree. Farmers' markets need to be retained as an organic organisation. We cannot apply the same strictures that apply to, for instance, a restaurant, café or other food outlet to a farmer's market. We are going in the right direction because there is a political recognition of their importance. They add value to the local economy and I welcome the contribution of the Minister of State in that respect.

Deputy Bobby Aylward: I approve of the concept of farmers' markets and I compliment the Minister of State on promoting them and bringing them to a higher level. Coming from the farming community, there is nothing as nice as going into a town and seeing a market displaying the wares that people have grown with their own hands and taken fresh directly from the field. It is wonderful, particularly for urban people but also for rural people to be able to buy fresh produce knowing where it has come from. Even the little bit of bargaining that we always knew over, for example, a bag of potatoes or a few turnips is a great concept. It is a great idea to bring it back to what we witnessed in our young days which was part of the tradition of Ireland.

The placement of farmers' markets in urban areas is a matter for local authorities. Having been a member of a local authority for many years, I am aware that while many councils may not have opposed the opening of farmers' markets per se, they were certainly not keen to facilitate those who were involved in markets. I was delighted to hear the Minister of State talking about providing essential services, such as water connections, in defined areas which will serve as locations for farmers' markets. I welcome the Minister of State's decision to put proper health and safety controls, etc, in place. Health is a particularly important issue when one is dealing with food products.

I will assume the role of devil's advocate when talking about the traceability of organic food. It has been suggested that imported potatoes, turnips and Brussels sprouts, etc, are being sold at farmers' markets under the guise of Irish organic produce. What controls will be introduced to ensure that the origin of produce being sold at these markets can be authenticated and traced? How can consumers be sure that what they are buying has come directly from local farms? How can we prevent clever wholesalers from selling imported produce that is labelled as having come from an Irish farm? Are rules and regulations in place to preclude such practices?

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I thank the Minister of State for his presentation. I recognise that he shares my genuine passion for food production. The manner in which we produce food, and how we should produce it, is of great importance not just to the overall economy, but also to the Irish way of life. The Minister of State is aware that the labelling of the country of origin of food products is an important issue. I welcome the various initiatives which have been pursued by the Minister of State, such as his discussions with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, and the establishment of the local authority farmers' market forum.

I would like to speak about the provision of facilities by local authorities. Old market squares need to be enhanced with plumbing facilities, etc. The Minister of State needs to discuss with local authorities their attitude to proposals as they are made. Not only should they assist farmers' markets themselves, but they should also support other sectors of the food production industry, such as abattoirs. I accept that local authorities will not provide abattoirs, but they could adopt a positive attitude towards them. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the various local authorities play a critical and essential role in the development of local food enterprises.

This committee has spoken previously about the need to assist small businesses which are involved in the processing and preparation of food. If sustainable farmers' markets are to be in a position to sell local produce, we need to ensure that adequate facilities are in place to provide for a constant stream of produce and develop a critical mass. Perhaps the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs can provide funds through the cohesion process, the rural partnerships or the Leader programme to enhance the development of micro co-ops at county or district level and support these markets. The whole thing should be organised within a structure that can be

sustained.

Some of the farmers' markets which were established over recent years have not survived. Many markets that started slowly are getting better. One would have to question the origin of a great deal of the produce that is being sold at farmers' markets. Oranges are sold at many markets even though they do not grow very well in this country and certainly do not ripen. Such produce can complement the core produce sold at farmers' markets, which has to come from local farms. Products from other countries are not as favourable in terms of air miles and traceability. Many more people are employed in the production of local produce than in mainstream food production.

I ask the Minister of State to look at the bigger picture. I appreciate that we are in the early stages. We have started to develop farmers' markets properly over the past 12 months. We need to ensure that this sector continues to grow. We cannot expect it to survive if we just leave it as it is.

The attitude of the local authorities and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to local abattoirs, which have an output of less than 1,000 units per annum, is very important in this context. The Minister of State needs to examine the regulation of abattoirs. While local abattoirs engage in the same level of regulation of suppliers who are seeking quality assured status as larger abattoirs, the monitoring of that regulation does not need to be as expensive. The viability of many food production enterprises, particularly local abattoirs, is suffering because they have to place a great deal of emphasis on the monitoring of regulations. If abattoirs are not available in local production centres - the towns where farmers' markets are held - there will be limits on what such markets can sell.

I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Sargent, to take those points on board. I know he will. I will talk to him about these matters in the future.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I welcome the Minister of State and compliment him on bringing the various groups involved in this sector together. I was delighted when he was given responsibility for food and horticulture because he has the interests of those who produce safe food in their own homes at heart. I am involved in the local market in Cahir, which has been up and running for a number of years. We did not receive the support of the local authority when we were setting up the market - we had to beg for water services and access to a proper site, etc. I hope the message that farmers' markets should be supported will filter down from the Minister of State.

I accept that certain Deputies, some of whom have left the meeting, do not fully support the concept of farmers' markets. The stall holders with whom I am familiar work hard in all types of weather and are fully committed, which is wonderful. I am pleased that the ancient tradition of having markets and fairs in our towns is being restored. As Deputy Aylward said, it is great that consumers can engage in a bit of banter with producers. It is better to see clay, rather than plastic packaging, on the vegetables being sold. All members of the committee should support this wonderful concept.

Chairman: I appeal to members to ensure that their mobile phones are fully switched off because they can affect the recording of the meeting even when they have been set to the silent mode.

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan: I welcome the Minister of State and his officials to the meeting. As someone who comes from a small farming background, I appreciate what the Minister of State is trying to achieve. It is important for small producers to have direct access to markets. The efforts which are currently being made should have been made some time ago. Given that farming needs to diversify if it is to survive, we need to place a focus on the production of good organic food. As the Minister of State said, the market for organic food is growing. We can achieve a great deal if we work together. There is no need for us to import such a high percentage of the vegetables sold in this country. There is plenty of good land in Ireland that is suited to the growing of vegetables.

Deputy Creed spoke about the provision of certain services at the locations where farmers' markets are organised. This problem is encountered every time it is proposed to start up a market. We have experienced it in Bantry, for example. When food markets are established in towns, other traders start to sell goods at the same time and leave a mess behind. This aspect of the matter will have to be addressed because it is giving farmers' markets a bad name.

I support fully the efforts of the Minister of State to get farmers' markets up and running. We should show some goodwill and address certain matters, such as the manner in which casual traders take advantage on market day of the setting up of a farmers' market. We will have to address that issue. Farmers' markets are important from a social point of view as they may be the only opportunity farmers have to meet in a week given that local pubs, shops and other facilities are closing down. The market is an opportunity to have a social day out. It is the way forward.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: I, too, welcome the Minister of State. Farmers' markets have been a brainchild of his for years and he was always inclined to have an open ear for problems in this area. However, like Deputy O'Sullivan, I believe farmers' markets should be confined to selling farm produce. People should not be given space to display products made in Hong Kong and Taiwan. People are coming to Bantry from Strabane and other places to sell everything from a needle to an anchor. How can this be described as a farmers' market? These people never had rights to display at the market before.

I collected eggs and butter from farmers 50 years ago in a little 1,500 cc pick-up truck. This is where I staked my reputation as a businessmen and, eventually, as a politician. At that time, egg inspectors from the Department of Agriculture visited my premises in Kilbrowne, a mile and a half from the village of Goleen. Every month, spot checks were made to ensure the eggs were properly presented for sale at market and to egg dealers. As late as two years ago, my son would be fined if he displayed farm eggs on the shelf with the mass produced eggs in his mini-market in Goleen because the former were not stamped by the Department of Agriculture and Food. Does this regulation pertain to eggs sold in the farmers' markets? Does the same scrutiny apply in markets as in greengrocers' shops?

Every town and village used to have a renowned greengrocer who bought his raw material at a good price from the farmers of the parish. The vegetable vans delivering from Cork and Dublin edged out these greengrocers. They cut the ground from under the greengrocer's shop, which may have employed one or two farmers' daughters. I agree, however, that opposition and competition are the lifeblood of trade.

When the supermarkets opened in towns they were told they could not buy from local farmers but must go through co-operatives and distributors in the city. This required bringing the produce 80 miles from Goleen to the distributor's in Cork, from where a van with the same goods would travel the 80 miles back to the local supermarket. The co-operatives cut out direct trade between farmers and the middleman. I dislike the moves afoot to cut out the middleman in any walk of life. It would be the same as dispensing with politicians and forming a committee to run the country from Dublin, which would be like a dictatorship.

At the local authority farmers' market forum, the Minister of State impressed on local authorities, which have powers under the Casual Trading Act, the need to make running water and power points available at markets. What grant was given to greengrocers to install power points or water? Is the Minister of State aware that greengrocers are compelled to pay water rates? Who will pay the rates for the farmers' markets?

Deputy Trevor Sargent: The stall holders.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: I hope they will.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: It is already happening.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: I hope the hard-pressed ratepayers will not have anything to do with it. Are farmers' markets exempt from rates?

Deputy Trevor Sargent: They are a different trading arrangement.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: If a small-scale greengrocer has a yard in which customers can park their cars, he is subject to local authority rates for the parking of cars on his premises for the purposes of his business. Many shortcomings remain to be addressed before we dive headlong into a situation where we have fellows from Omagh and Strabane in County Tyrone coming down to west Cork to sell goods made in Hong Kong and vegetables imported from the Netherlands as farm produce. A traceability system is not in place. Before we go overboard making concessions, we must establish regulations to ensure the grower's name is displayed on the vegetables. The Minister of State can then coppersfasten the farmers' market process.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I thank the Minister of State for his presentation. I agree with the principle underpinning farmers' market. In my home town, which holds a market twice each week, farmers use these markets to generate additional income. This is a positive development and I welcome the promotion of farmers' markets because they will be beneficial to many farmers. People are becoming accustomed to the idea and there is no doubt there is a market for it. Deputy Sheehan is correct, however, that some of the stall holders sell vegetables which are probably imported. Traceability is needed and while vegetables do not have to be organic, they must be grown on the farms of those selling them.

I acknowledge the Minister of State's decision to make available a grant to small abattoirs. Many of those engaged in this sector were hounded out of business by officials of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The 40% grant was not announced until after Christmas and has a lead-in time of two or three weeks, although it has been extended for a short period. I do not know what has been the level of uptake but those with whom I have spoken have expressed reluctance to go down that road again because of what they suffered the last time. I know of a modern plant that was built in 1985 with full planning permission but where changes had to be made subsequently. An inspector came from Dublin and made a list of work to be done. The job was completed at a cost of up to £20,000. Six or eight months later an inspector visited again and produced another list of work to be done. This went on and on. Some inspectors even contradicted each other and what was done previously had to be changed. People are reluctant to go down that road. The Department should keep an open mind on that grant and give people time because the timeframe is very short. With a bit of encouragement people might get back into that business, which provides extra income for farmers in those localities.

[Deputy Eamon Scanlon]

At one time there were 18 abattoirs in County Sligo and now only one remains and that has a limit of 1,000 livestock units. That limit needs to be examined because an operation with a total of 1,000 livestock units is not viable. If a farmer wants to get a lamb killed for his own freezer he has to take it from Sligo to Ballyhaunis, if they will do it, and God knows to wherever else if they will not. This matter needs to be addressed. These people need help because the prices paid by local butchers far exceeds the prices paid by meat factories. Local butchers use a different type of lamb than that used by the factories for export. This was a great source of income for local farmers. We should do whatever we can to try to support that. It is all part of increasing farmers' incomes and it is important to make this service available to local farmers.

Senator Paul Bradford: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Sargent, and his officials and I compliment him on his genuine endeavours. It is important to put this matter in perspective. No matter how successful the Minister of State is with his plans for farmers' markets and local produce, it will still be a small proportion of agricultural and food production. I wish the Minister of State well in expanding this area, in so far as it can be expanded.

I agree with what was said earlier by Deputy Sherlock about regulation. There is a degree of

informality in the concept of local markets and the more rules, regulations and bureaucracy we have the more it will become part of the norm. We must be careful in this regard.

I sometimes learn something from listening to Deputy Sheehan. I was struck by what he said about local bakers, butchers and shopkeepers. The Sheehan family and small shops are synonymous. There is only one shop in the Sheehan empire. If the regulations and bureaucracy we have introduced in the past 40 years had not conspired to shut down the greengrocers, small butchers, small bakeries and other small shops, we would not be having this debate because the produce which is selling in farmers' markets would be for sale in the small local supermarkets.

I appeal to the Minister of State to examine the regulations governing some of these businesses, especially abattoirs and butchers. Cork County Council adopted a strict approach to abattoirs. We were the first local authority to implement the Abattoirs Act in the late 1980s. The consequence has been the almost total disappearance of smaller butchers. The disappearance of these small shops is the biggest blow to local produce. The Minister of State should examine the rules and regulations governing all that sector because otherwise there is a danger that the products sold in these so-called local markets and farmers' markets may not be as local or as organic as we would hope and they would become simply another commercial outlet.

I fully support and welcome the setting up of these markets but we must be realistic about them. While there is room for expansion, it will not solve all problems faced by farmers or consumers. I urge the Minister to take on board what Deputy Sheehan said about small outlets, which in one sense were the original farmers' markets, and ensure we can somehow stem the tide and keep smaller shops in operation because they are a genuine source of local products.

I wish the Minister of State well. He has a sincere commitment to this area. He should watch the regulations. Any householder who keeps hens is supposed to be registered with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. One has to fill in a form stating how many hens one has. Thank God we have Oireachtas privilege so I can state my mother's four hens have not been declared to the Department and she will not be prosecuted. Interestingly, she only gets two eggs every day from the four hens.

Deputy Michael Creed: Does the Senator need constitutional privilege for that?

Senator Paul Bradford: I am claiming privilege, fully supported by the Taoiseach. It is disturbing that only two eggs are produced every day. Perhaps we need a tribunal. That rule may have been introduced as a result of the avian flu. I was amused when I saw a form of two or three pages on the matter. I did not observe it fully. That is not for the record.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: Fifty years ago when I was collecting eggs from farmers' wives around the country a young fellow might come out of a house and ask for a half pound of tea, two pounds of sugar and bread. He would thank me saying his mother would pay when the hens would lay.

Chairman: Senator Bradford must not have a companion for the hens. If he has only four that is all he will be left with. I advise him to get a companion for them.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I apologise for being late. I missed the Minister of State's presentation but I had a chance to read through it. I heard much of the commentary about how farmers' markets would affect local shopkeepers. I used to take produce to the farm market at a time when there were never as many small shops. Most of these shops are gone now but they were not affected at that time. It was a part of local culture to have a farm market on a Saturday. Farmers took potatoes and other vegetables to it. They were in competition with shopkeepers but they both survived until such time as intensification became the norm. Small producers were wiped out in the same way as small shopkeepers.

I welcome this approach; it is a wonderful idea. I also welcome the involvement of local authorities on this issue. I further welcome the proposal on traceability from a food safety point of

view. The checks and balances in the implementation process are of great importance.

The Green Party was, and I assume still is, a supporter of organic production. I have concerns regarding the proposal that by 2012, 5% of agricultural produce should be produced organically. I am concerned about the opening of a GM produce market in Ireland and cross-contamination. From an international perspective, it can be regarded as detrimental to the production of organic food.

Chairman: The Deputy is referring to GM foods.

Deputy Martin Ferris: No. I am referring to organic production and cross-contamination.

Chairman: We are discussing GM foods after this item.

Deputy Martin Ferris: It is relevant to my question. Allowing GMO production alongside organic production could prove detrimental to our export market because of cross-contamination. I would like a reply in respect of this.

Farmers' markets can create opportunities for small and medium-sized farms. Farmers with 25 or 30 acres can produce their own produce and take it to the local market, thus creating a livelihood if production is coupled with some off-farm work. Farmers can earn an increased and perhaps sustainable income from land subject to decoupling. I, therefore, welcome the proposals on farmers' markets. Local authorities, including local elected representatives, can play a considerable role in promoting them.

Chairman: Every speaker has complimented the Minister of State and I would like to be associated with the comments made in the light of the work he has done. It was some achievement to reach consensus at the forum. What response did he receive from the local authorities? Many local authority officials are not interested in farmers' markets or any market for that matter. In many towns the local authorities are trying to shove the markets out because they are more interested in the shops that are paying rates. They are losing car parking spaces. Having said that, the markets are not being shoved out in every county. When I hold clinics in the Coole area in County Westmeath, the constituents claim the number of markets in Delvin and Castlepollard is a credit to those involved. They are not all farmers' markets. It is, therefore, vital that what the Minister of State is trying to do will not be overrun by traders, as we call them.

EU regulations were responsible for the closing down of many farmers' markets years ago. How will the Minister of State address this? Producers used to make butter and sell it, in addition to eggs, about which we all talked, and home-made brown bread. Doing so now requires a licence. I hope the Minister of State will examine this. Too much regulation could sound the death-knell for what is proposed before it starts.

Deputies Doyle and Scanlon referred to the family butcher and abattoirs. Last Saturday after my clinic meeting in Delvin I met a butcher who slaughters his own animals and who has spent a lot of money during the years upgrading his premises. A grant is available for doing so but applicants need to spend €80,000. In the whole of County Westmeath there are only 11 butchers slaughtering their own animals. This represents a big change when one considers that there could have been 100 butchers slaughtering their own animals in certain counties.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Only one out of 18.

Chairman: If the Minister of State could provide a grant amounting to €5,000 to €15,000, for example, for those spending €20,000 or €30,000 on upgrading their premises, it would be beneficial. Many butchers are not in a position to spend €80,000 to qualify for grant aid. As Deputy Scanlon states, butchers are going out of business by the day. It is great to enter a butcher's shop when one knows the producers whose cattle, sheep or eggs are sold within. I appeal to the Minister of State to consider these matters. We all support him.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I have been taking notes and realise that many of the contributions contained advice as much as questions. I realise the advice is coming from those who are experiencing what they are talking about at first hand. As in the Seanad debate, to which Senator Bradford contributed so eloquently, I will be taking note of all the comments made.

I said to county and city managers, cathaoirigh and mayors that a farmers' market is not to be regarded as a shop without a roof. It is a different animal in the sense that seasonal local produce is being sold. A shop must provide a broad range of goods, in addition to some local produce, but a farmers' market is different in that it not only offers a retail opportunity but also has social and market research aspects. The decline in the number of farmers needs to be reversed. To this end, farmers' markets can play a small part in making the difference between viable and non-viable production. It can mean one's son or daughter can remain on the farm and not move away to make a living. This indicates the social benefit in addition to the economic one. Farmers' markets have offered an opportunity to many to develop products, in addition to staying in business. This must be borne in mind.

A farmers' market is, in many ways, a shop window, although it might not constitute a large part of the food industry. Countries such as France that have a long tradition of having local markets present these markets as opportunities for the farmer to engage with the consumer and appreciate what the consumer wants. It is a very attractive aspect of their tourism product, from which we must not detract.

Deputy Creed asked how farmers' markets came about. They are community focused and there is nobody from the Department or even the local authorities advocating their creation. In County Wexford the local IFA branch was very much driving the growth of farmers' markets in Enniscorthy, Gorey, New Ross and Wexford town. In other areas local food producers were often instrumental, as in Midleton, the market in which is renowned internationally. In the latter case, the food producers were driving the market, with a very active committee, as Deputy Sherlock knows well. The process is organic in that the local community comes together, in whatever guise, to create the market.

I stated in my presentation that farmers' markets have generally been welcomed by local traders. In Midleton it is at the front door of the SuperValu shop. It is a complementary activity and according to Bord Bia's research, for every €10 spent at the local farmers' market there is a net gain to the community of €24. We can dissect and analyse that research but this is positive for local shops which experience a 30% increase in trade when the market is operating.

I agree that the area should not be over-regulated. The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, said the same. It is not intended to regulate except where absolutely necessary. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland, FSAI, has health guidelines for markets. I am not responsible for that but am in close contact with the FSAI to ensure that it facilitates market activity as much as possible, in line with good health and safety standards.

The other side of the regulation is signage. The tradition has been hit and miss, with amateur sandwich boards on the side of the road which undersell the markets. Local authorities put up signs for other activities and the farmers' market signs should be of that standard, with all the relevant details.

I agree with Deputy Aylward about organic traceability. When I came into the Department I was not happy about the burden placed on the individual responsible for checking that the organic certification and regulations were correct. We have increased the powers and personnel available so that the law is enforced. To date I have not heard, but am always open to hearing, from people about specific incidents. These should be reported. An organic producer can avoid any misunderstanding by displaying the certification. It would be fair for every producer to declare himself or herself and their farm or the origin of the produce. That makes it more attractive and adds to the authenticity and traceability of the product.

There is growth potential in the organic area because 70% of the market worth is imported. We export a great deal of money and while more money is spent on other items there is potential for import substitution. That is why I set the target of 5% to give a clear political message that growth potential should be encouraged in this area.

The experience in other countries has been that people producing for farmers' markets tend to have diverse produce. When I was in Listowel, however, I saw a man selling only potatoes and he was doing well. He said that were it not for the farmers' market he would not be in business, which did not surprise me given the price being paid to farmers for potatoes. A stall with diverse produce will attract more attention than one selling a single product. We need both. The farmer I spoke to in England was a convert to the farmers' market from having been a large scale farmer because he sold 5% of his produce at the market himself and earned 35% of his return there. Given the poor return he received from the multiples, that represented 100% of his profit. The farmers' market was keeping him afloat. Several farmers in Midleton said the same. They were shy and apprehensive about what people would say about their produce to their faces. After trying out the market, however, they were sold on the idea because it gave them a fair return and the feedback helped them develop their produce.

Deputy Seán Sherlock: People at the farmers' markets know how to charge too.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: That is exactly the point I am coming to. I have told the county and city managers that the problem starts with them. Deputy Creed asked who pays. The burden is shared. The stallholder expects to pay a fair rent, not a killing that is going to make some private operator a lot of money, but one that the local authority can offset against the cost. There is Leader programme funding too about which we communicate with the Department for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. I have also spoken to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government because his Department provides significant funding for local authorities. I hope to work out a means of channelling that funding between that Department and mine, towards the basic infrastructure. The local authorities will then be able to charge a fair, reasonable rent, based pro rata on the area of the stall so the stallholder does not have to load his or her prices.

There have been examples of killing the goose that lays the golden egg because stallholders have thought if people are out for the day, socialising, they do not mind paying and they have tested how high they will jump when charged. That will destroy the purpose of the farmers' market which is to make food available at a reasonable cost and sell a product that is not available in the shops.

I enjoy talking to Deputy Doyle because he knows the business like the back of his hand and can tell me how practical is the grant I might mention. We need to build the take-up of the grant, which Deputy Scanlon mentioned because of the fear among people who have been stung. There may well have been rigorous inspectors, of whom I have heard many anecdotal stories. There was also the unfortunate period of BSE which caused rapid and radical changes to regulations which required much investment from the abattoirs to enforce them.

I can imagine there were many sleepless nights for owners who had to decide to go the extra mile or back out. So many took the latter option that we are left with a large deficit in abattoirs. Some areas are better provided for than others but I know it is particularly bad in County Wicklow.

Regarding the €80,000 threshold in the grant aid for small abattoirs, we were trying to keep it as low as possible to encourage people to put up the money. The figure was arrived at following much consultation. I accept the figure may not be perfect and we may need to re-examine it. This is the benefit of a session like this.

Deputy Doyle said oranges do not grow in Ireland. He is right except for the ones that do not ripen.

Deputy Michael Creed: What about sour grapes?

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I do not know about them but I know what the Deputy means. I have tasted some nice grapes grown in Ireland but that is another story.

An ongoing discussion at the artisan forum concerns the limits on the term "local produce". Many traders in farmers' markets argue all produce should be primarily local. However, in the lean and hungry months, particularly March to June when there is not the same level of produce, it can be difficult to keep public interest in the farmers' markets. The jury is still out on this. I know one farmer who was able to provide a box of vegetables for the 52 weeks of the year. A proportion of food coming from outside a locality is seen as reasonable.

In the past this has been well exploited in some markets. The wool has been pulled over people's eyes where a product was bought at a wholesalers and then sold on. Some multiples use vegetables as a loss leader. I do not want someone buying vegetables in a multiple and then selling them on at a farmers' market for a higher price.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: I assure the Minister of State it was happening.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: That is the idea behind these discussions.

I know the famous Bantry market well, from when I lived in Derrycreigh some years ago. The market has a reputation around the country for being a magnet for traders selling mobile telephone covers and so on.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: There were no trading rights for mobile telephones 50 years ago.

Chairman: Allow the Minister of State without interruption.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: It was not quite 50 years ago when I lived there but I take the Deputy's point.

The reason we got together with the local authorities was to make clear what happens in areas abroad with good traditions of food markets. We brought speakers from France and England where food markets operate separately. It does not mean people are not selling jeans, records and mobile telephone covers at these markets.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: And shoes and Wellington boots with no rates on their premises.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: That is a great advertisement for Bantry.

Abroad the food market is separate. The conditions for selling food are obviously different from those for selling Wellington boots and jeans. In France, they are sold at a separate location. That is the direction of development we are giving to local authorities.

Cahir market is famous and I compliment Deputy Mattie McGrath on the work achieved there. I did not know it had not been supported much by the local authority. I hope the food market element will develop separately so we are not confusing the two issues.

Litter laws apply to markets regardless of operator. Anyone who leaves behind a mess is liable to losing some of his or her profits to litter fines.

I know there is a large difference between Strabane and Taiwan. Deputy P. J. Sheehan made an interesting point on the appropriate radius for local produce. This is another area open to consultation. In England, a 30-mile radius is in place for farmers' markets, with an exception for cities. In the Irish case, many market operators claim this would not be possible because the critical mass of produce would not be available in such a radius. They have suggested extending

the radius. Some argue the radius of the island of Ireland should be considered to define local product, which would include Strabane. If Deputy P.J. Sheehan has more thoughts on this, I would be very pleased to hear them.

Individuals directly selling eggs, such as Senator Bradford's family, do not need a number on them.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: What about the woman with four hens?

Deputy Trevor Sargent: While they must fill out some forms, they would not be the same as those for a large scale production. If it is large scale and intensive production, the Department must be satisfied the regulations governing source and size of the egg farm are up to scratch. That is why a number is required for that product.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: Five dozen free range eggs were delivered to a little shop in Goleen, west Cork. An inspector arrived and gave the shopkeeper one more chance but she was not allowed to display the eggs for sale. The shop had to put them under the counter. Will the Minister of State explain this?

Chairman: I will allow Deputy Christy O'Sullivan a supplementary question.

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan: To clarify the egg situation, is one allowed to sell eggs openly at a farmers' market without being regulated while a shop must be?

Deputy Trevor Sargent: If they are the seller's own eggs. However, there is a limit.

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan: Clarification is needed on that because people do not know where they stand in this regard.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I can give a full explanation including the threshold levels and the regulations that are in place.

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan: It is vitally important, if this is to be successful, that there is a designated area for a farmers' market.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: That is why we are talking to the local authorities.

Chairman: Members should allow the Minister of State to finish.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I shall just deal with Deputy O'Sullivan's question. That is one of the many reasons it is important this process of discussion with the local authorities is fully worked out and that we agree on the minimum level of regulations to bring about consistency and a working arrangement. Many towns have well known market areas which stand out, as regards attracting visitors. Others need to be more specific. For example, in Clonmel there is an arrangement to use the playground of the local school, which works quite well. Obviously, the school is not open on a Saturday, so everybody is involved in the arrangement and its location is well known. This matter needs to be discussed at local level and it is not for the Department to be determining what the arrangements should be. That is why local authorities have such a central role to play because traffic and other considerations must be taken into account.

There are probably quite a number of other questions, but I appreciate that we have two issues to deal with.

Chairman: There is another meeting here at 2 p.m., so we have to be out of here by then, even though we were held up by the previous meeting. I shall now ask the Minister of State to make his second presentation, on GMO issues.

GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOODS: DISCUSSION WITH MINISTER OF STATE

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I would like to thank the committee for inviting me here, again, today to speak about the commitment in the programme for Government which seeks to negotiate the establishment of an all-Ireland GM free zone. As Minister of State, the key objectives I am pursuing relate to wider issues that this is part of and these are to enhance the premier position held by Irish agriculture in the European market; to ensure that Ireland becomes less dependent on imported feed and to ensure secure, sustainable and affordable supplies of feed for Irish farmers; and to secure affordable supplies of organic and non-GM feed for those Irish farmers who are pursuing emerging organic and non-GM markets. I believe the fulfillment of these objectives is essential to the future success of Irish agriculture.

The issue of modern biotechnology has become very topical over the past decade or so. We all see, and many of us have experienced, the benefits biotechnological advancements in the area of medicine and pharmaceuticals have brought and I wholeheartedly applaud advancements such as developments in the production of insulin for the treatment of diabetes. However, it is the use of this technology in the area of modern agriculture and food production that is causing concern.

Last year over 95% of all GM cultivation took place in six countries as follows: The US - 50%, Argentina - 17%, Brazil - 13%, Canada - 6%, India - 5% and China - 3%. Four GM crops make up almost 100% of the cultivation: GM soya - 57%, GM maize - 25%, GM cotton - 13% and GM oilseed rape - 5%. The latter is referred to in the US and Canada as canola.

Various EU consumer and market surveys have shown that people have concerns about the use of this technology in the open environment. I am sure it will come as no surprise that I share many of those concerns. The Council of Ministers and the European Parliament has introduced GM legislation which governs the approval, cultivation, use and labelling of GM products. This legislation is binding on all member states.

There is now a high degree of resistance within the EU to the introduction of GM crops and products. This has been reflected in votes at the EU Council of Ministers. Surveys have shown that in excess of 70% of EU consumers have indicated a preference for food products derived from animals not fed on GM feedstuffs. I believe it is in the interest of all involved in marketing Irish food to take cognisance of this.

Notwithstanding the fact that all of the GM applications considered by Council since July 2003, with one exception, were for the importation of food or feed consisting of or containing a GM event, rather than for cultivation, none achieved qualified majority support from the member states. Ireland's abstention on the recent votes on approving GM feed was the most appropriate position to take given that a process has been established involving relevant Departments - the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Health and Children and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government - to elaborate this commitment and tease out its implications for policy. The French, Italians and others are involved in similar processes, and some have gone considerably further than Ireland, indeed, as we may be able to discuss later.

As EU Governments, in line with consumer surveys, have been reluctant to approve these products, it has fallen to the Commission, under comitology rules, to approve applications. In Ireland, we do not have, and we never have had, any commercial cultivation of GM crops. This situation is likely to continue, and that is the feedback I get from talking to farm organisations as well. I acknowledge that in the past 12 months there have been difficulties for farmers depending on feed concentrates, with the price of imported feed materials increasing by as much as 80%. The following are the main factors involved: increased demand worldwide for which there are many reasons, not least population growth; diversion of feed for the production of biofuels, which

has made an enormous impact in the US; reduced supplies arising from the unfavourable weather conditions and climate change effects in several cereal producing regions such as Australia which has been severely affected; increased freight charges, a growing problem with peak oil on the horizon and oil prices now breaking the \$100 a barrel mark; increased fertiliser prices, given that fertiliser is so energy dependent; Ireland's dependence on international feed markets; and trading difficulties due the lack of synchronised GM feed authorisation processes between the USA and the EU.

Some of these issues were covered by officials from my Department who appeared before the committee on 23 January 2008. I can assure the committee that the Department is doing all it can to address the current feed price situation. Last Friday, I visited a number of feed mills and spoke with farmers who are facing major difficulties in covering the rising cost of feed. I have consistently said that the commitment in the programme for Government is not about banning imported feed but rather about seeking to negotiate the establishment of an all Ireland GM-free zone so that we can avoid the release of live GMOs into the Irish environment. We are thinking of all farmers in this regard, not just organic farmers. Conventional farmers would also be affected if crossover were to occur with GMOs. The process of elaborating and teasing out the implications of the commitment is ongoing. A senior officials group chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach has considered matters and has identified issues which arise. These issues have been referred back for further evaluation and consideration to individual Departments.

Several Departments have responsibility for aspects of GM policy. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has responsibility for the deliberate release of GMOs into the environment, including for crop cultivation. The Department of Health and Children has responsibility for GM food safety and consumer protection. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has responsibility for the regulation of GM feed and seeds, including the co-existence of GM crops to ensure compliance with GM labelling regulations, if such crops were ever to be grown in Ireland. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has responsibility for developments in the biotechnology industry and in research and development.

Issues relating to the initial authorisation or otherwise of crops for cultivation in Ireland are primarily a matter for the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. However, my Department will work closely with that Department to ensure that all relevant factors are fully considered in decisions to be taken.

In conclusion, I would like to refer again to my own objectives as Minister of State, which are to enhance the premier position of Irish food in the European market, to secure sustainable and affordable supplies of feed for Irish farmers, and to encourage and facilitate those Irish farmers who are pursuing emerging organic and non-GM markets. A significant number of conventional and organic farmers are finding that non-GM feed is difficult to source, and that organic feed is being bought by non-organic farmers who want to avoid a GM component. If they are selling to any one of the large multiples that have specified a non-GM feed, such as Coop Italia, they are left with few options. These objectives build on the excellent work carried out by Bord Bia to promote Ireland as a clean, green quality food-producing island. We need to ensure that such a reputation is upheld, and the attainment of the objectives is essential for Ireland's economic well being. I hope that we can work together to ensure that we build that reputation as a clean, green food island.

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Minister of State for his presentation. I omitted to welcome his colleagues, some of whom were at the committee on 23 January and who made interesting submissions and observations on this issue. I am anxious that we have a rational, informed, scientifically based debate on genetically modified food and feed. We should leave outside any baggage that we might bring to the table, in order to reach a consensus. It will be a key issue in the agricultural industry in Ireland and across the globe in the not too distant future, if it is not so already.

The Minister stated that his objectives build on the excellent work carried out by Bord Bia to

promote Ireland as a clean, green quality food producing island. The reality today is that Bord Bia is marketing food produced here from animals that are fed with a genetically modified feed component. While I accept that there is consumer hostility to a certain degree, I also believe there is a huge vacuum in public information. We need to have this public debate so that we can inform people who can then make rational choices. The danger is that people will get painted into corners. I am not promoting exclusively a GM feed industry, but I do make the point that while there is room for a non-GM stream and for organic food, it is equally impossible overnight to turn around a multi-billion euro industry and close off the pipeline that has given it access to GM feed until now.

I believe it was Mr. Ryan who on 23 January described the policy towards GM food, prior to the establishment of the new Government, as positive but precautionary. The reality now is that the policy is hostile to GM feed. I respect the policy position of the Green Party, even though I do not agree with it. By virtue of that party's participation in the Government, there is a policy towards a GM-free island. I am still at a loss as to what that means in terms of policy, but it is impossible to turn around a multi-billion euro industry overnight and close off that access. Commentators like Professor Jimmy Burke from Teagasc have stated that the availability of non-GM feed component will virtually disappear entirely. These are the realities to which we must face up.

In the past week we have seen a mill closure in Cavan and we have also seen the disappearance of a very significant player in the poultry market, when a turkey producer in the same region closed down. These closures have resulted in job losses. We must also be conscious of the fact that we have consumed more food per annum in the past five years than we have produced. The policy thread that links these issues and emphasises that we are playing in a global village is the GM issue. It is tied into the closure of the mill and of the poultry producer. I suspect that the mill was particularly exposed to the pig and especially the poultry sector, given the region in which it was located. The Chairman might know more about that. These are the industries that have borne the brunt of an €80 per tonne increase in animal feedstuffs in the last few months. Significant parts of that increase are due to the change in policy at national level.

The Minister of State may well disagree with that analysis, but he should talk to the representatives of the Irish Grain and Feed Association who made a presentation to this committee not that long ago. Their contention is that prevarication and even hostility towards the GM approval mechanism cost their members and Irish agriculture €160 million last year. That is a huge cost base that we could address. The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has spoken about the need to synchronise the approval mechanisms, but we prevaricate at a European level and defer decision making all the time from standing committees to the Council of Ministers and back to the Commission. It may be as well that this roundabout manner exists, because if we were dependent on the political system to approve these, then we certainly would not make progress quickly.

If politicians constantly question the veracity of scientific evidence on GM foodstuffs from organisations such as the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, the EFSA or the FDA in the US, does it not call into question the decisions that these bodies make on a wide variety of other issues - approval of medicines, veterinary medicines, human medicines, chemical sprays and so on? Are we just to cherry pick and say that while we wholeheartedly support the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, the European Food Safety Authority and the United States FDA, we do not support them on this one issue? The point is glaring in terms of the Minister of State's colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, and his position on global warming. There is a body of scientific opinion that supports the position taken by the Minister, Deputy Gormley, to which I subscribe. However, there is also a body of scientific opinion that would suggest global warming is a natural phenomenon and will run its course, and that we are overreacting - this is a minority view. We cannot on the one hand encourage people to accept scientific evidence as the basis of policy and then adopt - I do not mean to be offensive - a flat earth approach when it comes to the scientific debate on genetically-modified foods.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: The opposite is the case.

Deputy Michael Creed: It does not appear to be the case.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: The Deputy should give me the health tests to which he refers and which he wants to stand by.

Deputy Michael Creed: I am getting under the Minister of State's skin because my point may not suit. I have sat here for the past hour and a half-----

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I will listen but I will not let that go unanswered.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Minister of State will have his opportunity to answer. He should calm down and listen.

Chairman: Order, please. We have limited time.

Deputy Michael Creed: Is it sustainable to argue that, on the one hand, we should embrace scientific evidence on global warming and then, on the other, cherry pick and say we will not embrace scientific evidence when it comes to genetically-modified food or feed? If the Minister of State cannot bring himself to have a rational, calm debate, we are in a dangerous situation. We need this from a scientific and economic perspective but, equally, we need it from a moral perspective, although I am reluctant to introduce that terminology into the debate. If one is living in sub-Saharan Africa and could have access to a genetically-modified feed that is drought-resistant and will grow in harsher conditions, who are we in our Western comfort zone to say we are sorry but we will refuse to approve it because it does not suit us? We must take into account that global food consumption is out of kilter with production and the world population is growing annually at a rate of 70 million. These are huge challenges to which we cannot turn a blind eye. If the science on global warming-----

Deputy Trevor Sargent: The Deputy should give me the science.

Deputy Michael Creed: The science on global warming-----

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I am not talking about global warming; I am talking about GM.

Chairman: That is what we are discussing, not global warming.

Deputy Michael Creed: If the European Food Safety Authority, the FDA and the FSAI recommend approval of Herculex, why-----

Deputy Trevor Sargent: They do not do the tests.

Deputy Michael Creed: If they recommend it, why does the Government take a position that is hostile, to say the least, to the approval mechanism, while the Minister, Deputy Coughlan, speaks out of the corner of her mouth about the need to synchronise the approval mechanisms between the FDA and the European authorities? There is inconsistency in policy. The Minister of State's response is not reassuring in terms of the need for a rational and calm debate.

I pointed to what Dr. Burke of Teagasc had to say on the non-availability within ten years of a non-GM alternative for the feed industry. This advice is available to the Minister of State's Department, as an organ of State, and should be taken into account. I am aware the Minister of State has set his cap against being fully informed on these issues by people who are experts in the area.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: What is the Deputy trying to say? What does he mean by suggesting I do not want to hear information?

Deputy Michael Creed: May I finish? I have listened to the Minister of State all morning and am entitled to make my observations. He made his prepared four-page presentation.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I have listened for longer than the Deputy had to listen to me.

Chairman: Order, please. The Deputy should continue.

Deputy Michael Creed: I listened but the Minister of State is not listening.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I am listening all too carefully.

Deputy Michael Creed: As I said, we live in a global village. We import beef, such as Brazilian beef, from countries where cattle are fed on GM feed. We import poultry from outside the European Union that is fed on GM feed. Why then do we make it so difficult for farmers to access these feedstuffs when they are obliged to compete against produce that has the competitive cost advantage of being fed on these feeds, which are cheaper than the non-GM varieties which the Minister of State has obliged millers to source?

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I do not oblige millers to source anything.

Chairman: Order, please.

Deputy Michael Creed: The Minister of State has done so and he has said it in-----

Deputy Trevor Sargent: Farmers want non-GM feed.

Deputy Michael Creed: Some may, and I am all in favour of those who wish to go the non-GM route. What I said is it is not possible to turn around a multibillion euro industry. If the Minister of State and his Department do not understand this, farmers are in serious difficulty.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I agree with the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Creed: It is not possible to turn around a multibillion euro industry overnight and move to non-GM varieties which may not be available as an alternative in ten years and are not available currently in sufficient quantities to meet the demand. It is great to have the objective of growing more grain here but we will never be in a position to be self-sustaining in terms of grain production. We must face many uncomfortable realities in this regard.

We must come to this debate with an open mind. From the Minister of State's reaction, it is obvious he does not have an open mind on this debate. It is a change in policy. The Minister of State referred in his speech to ongoing deliberations. He stated: "Ireland's abstention on the recent votes on approving GM feed was the most appropriate position to take given that a process has been established involving relevant Departments". We have reached a decision that we will be a GM-free island but we are still involved in the process. If we had a policy conclusion arising from the process, that would be a fine thing but we are now trying to engineer a conclusion from this consultation process that will fit with the policy decision that has already been taken. That is regrettable and has serious consequences for the industry.

I ask that this issue would be revisited as a matter of urgency. It is imposing considerable additional costs on primary food producers, which will inevitably feed through to consumers. This is something for which the Minister of State and his Department bear substantial responsibility.

Deputy Seán Sherlock: There is an ambivalence in the Government's position on this issue. The position the Government has taken at Council of Ministers level is one in which, one senses from the position of abstention, there has been a shift. In spite of the scientific advice and rationale applied by the EU scientific committee, the Government is going against this advice and has adopted a position against the importation of EU scientific committee-approved feedstuffs. If

that is the Government's position or if the Government has arrived at a new position, there must be no ambivalence about it. It must be clearly communicated to the agricultural sector because farmers who are feeding livestock will need to know the Government's position on this matter.

I am not a scientist, I am a layman, but my view is that we must rely on science. The EU scientific committee has applied a certain rationale which is based on common sense and practical solutions. If it is advocating a certain position, I do not understand why the Government is not adhering to that advice or why it would abstain on votes when the time comes.

What we are talking about is whether Irish agriculture can sustain its competitiveness and, ultimately, whether Irish consumers will have to pay for the increased costs of feedstuffs that arise from the non-importation of scientifically-approved feedstuffs from the EU. If that is the case, it will have a negative permutation for consumers. If these feedstuffs are not approved, the inevitable outcome is that we will begin importing cheaper produce that is fed on genetically modified organisms. I do not see why we cannot apply a more rational approach.

The Minister of State said in his presentation:

I have consistently said that the commitment in the programme for Government is not about banning imported feed but rather about seeking to negotiate the establishment of an all-Ireland GM-free zone so that we can avoid the release of live GMOs into the Irish environment.

The Minister says he is not against banning imported feed. Will he tell us unequivocally whether he is opposed to the banning of genetically modified feed that is scientifically approved by the EU? We require a clear statement of Government policy. There must be no ambivalence at this stage in the process.

There is no dichotomy or contradiction between maintaining the biodiversity of this island and the importation of EU-approved feedstuffs. The two are not mutually exclusive. It is reasonable to express reservations about scientific trials on the growth of GM feedstuffs pending further debate and dialogue. However, if the EU scientific committee advises and recommends that we import certain feedstuffs, I do not see why the Government cannot approve it. We have all bought into that process by virtue of our membership of the EU.

The precautionary principle is rolled out when it is politically expedient to do so. The Green wedge or wing of the Government has a politically philosophical position on these issues and there is a certain constituency to which it must play. This is to the detriment of Irish agriculture and ultimately the Irish consumer who will end up, if we continue on this route, paying less but without a guarantee that imported livestock or meat products from third countries are GM-free.

Chairman: We have a decision to make because we must vacate the room at 1.50 p.m. I ask Deputy Ferris to be brief. We must then decide whether to invite the Minister of State to another meeting to continue this discussion.

Deputy Martin Ferris: This debate is essentially about the opposition to commercial cultivation of GM produce on the island of Ireland and the approval or otherwise of the importation of scientifically approved GM feedstuffs. That is the essence of the matter but it is being clouded. It is my understanding that a GM-free zone refers to an area where no GMOs are cultivated. I have been supportive of that from the beginning. My party was the first to take action in this regard when we put forward a motion in the Chairman's county and it snowballed throughout the country from there.

It is extremely troubling that feedstuffs have increased in price by 80% in the past 12 months. That strikes a chord with me. Some 95% of countries are for GM cultivation. One of the most well known producers is Monsanto and its terminal seed. What is at play here is control of international food supplies. That is my position. It is one that used to be shared by the Labour Party and the Green Party when we were in opposition together.

Deputy Sherlock referred to the Minister of State's comment that Government policy is "not about banning imported feed". Does this include feed from GM production? The Minister of State also stated :

In Ireland, we do not have, and we never have had, any commercial cultivation of GM crops. This situation is likely to continue, and that is the feedback I get from talking to farm organisations as well.

There is ambiguity in the use of the word "likely". Will the Minister of State clarify it? The reality is that GM feedstuffs have been imported into Ireland for a considerable time. It is a red herring to say that is not happening. The 80% increase in feedstuff prices poses major questions. The prices of various agricultural products, milk and so forth, all increased substantially this year and now, all of a sudden, the price of feedstuff also increases. It seems there is some piggybacking on the benefit to farming communities arising from the increase in what they receive for their produce.

Chairman: I call Deputy Christy O'Sullivan in order that there will have been one speaker from each party. I ask him to be brief.

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan: Much of what I wanted to say has been said already. We all aspire to a clean, green environment in which we can produce quality food. However, we must deal with reality. The Minister of State said in his presentation that we must secure sustainable and affordable supplies of feed for Irish farmers. How will that be done at a competitive price? He also referred to the importance of encouraging and facilitating those Irish farmers who are pursuing emerging organic and non-GM markets. We all subscribe to that objective. There is much at stake here and time is of the essence. There are farmers in dire straits who will be out of business long before we can achieve anything that would be of help to them. We must be realistic. Scientific evidence has been presented and must be considered. I must have an answer for the farmers in my constituency who ask whether they will be able to stay in business. It is as simple as that.

Chairman: Would the Minister of State like to return for another meeting of the committee to finish this debate?

Deputy Trevor Sargent: It seems the debate is only starting. I would like the courtesy of some reply to members' points.

Chairman: Certainly. I will allow the Minister of State five minutes; that is all the time remaining. Other members wished to speak but I was fair in allowing one from each party. We will try to have another debate as soon as possible.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: Deputy Creed is correct; the debate must be based on scientific fact and must take into account all the factors. Science is an important aspect of it but, as an exporting nation, we cannot overlook the hostility in the markets the Deputy mentioned.

Deputy Michael Creed: It is probably resistance rather than hostility.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: That is one view. The surveys are well documented. An important market for us is Germany and we are competing with Poland in this regard. It is becoming clear that the Polish see an export opportunity in going the non-GM feed route. I agree that our approach must be based primarily on science.

Moreover, as I mentioned in my presentation, arising from their concern or however one might wish to put it, the French and Italians also decided not to give their full blessing to the authorisation. The point should be put on the record.

Deputy Michael Creed: Members also have put on the record that the French are self-sufficient and export-----

Chairman: Allow the Minister of State to respond. Deputy Creed was allowed speak for a long time.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: One can put many points on the record. I made this point because we sell €602 million worth of food to France. I do not want this to be overlooked.

Deputy Michael Creed: However, it is not marketed as being GM-free.

Chairman: The Minister of State should continue.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: We do not market it as being GM food either. As Deputy Creed can appreciate, it is tempting to intervene when one is obliged to listen to these points. However, I was obliged to listen to the Deputy, which was also difficult.

Deputy Michael Creed: I will do my best.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: Nevertheless, I take on board the Deputy's comments.

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland has a job to do. It is not made easy by the fact that the Food and Drug Administration in the United States does not carry out the requisite food safety trials but takes on board the industry's assurances. Members can check this matter out as I have done, and members should consider this issue.

Deputy Michael Creed: People are making comments from the Public Gallery, which is not allowed.

Chairman: No comments are allowed from the Public Gallery. I heard them.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I would prefer not to have interruptions and I apologise for this.

It is important to consider the extant scientific evidence, as there is a lack of scientific evidence due to the absence of checking or monitoring. Unfortunately, this helps neither my case nor that of Deputy Creed, because this absence creates concern in the minds of those to whom we are trying to sell food. I have visited France, Italy and Germany to speak to those who buy our produce and as matters stand, they both note and identify with the Bord Bia grass-fed production system. Long may that continue to be the case because it is what makes Ireland succeed and we must continue to promote this image in every possible way.

In addition, we should take on board in a serious manner the challenges facing the feed industry. Whatever one may wish to think, this issue will not be dealt with by me stating publically that GM feed should be imported. The FSAI's position at present is that it is not even in a position to consider the aforementioned two new events that are needed in Ireland because of the current shortages in grain feed. It has been obliged to revert to Syngenta in the United States to ask for additional information and awaits a response from that company. Unfortunately, this is outside the political process and will continue to be so until the company, Syngenta, comes back with the information requested by the FSAI.

Members should assess what they can do as politicians. It is not always possible to do everything in politics that one would wish to do. However, in so far as is possible, one should address the other outstanding issues. Deputy Creed only referred to one of the impediments and problems that have caused the increase in price. While the other six are probably more difficult to deal with, it still is important to focus on them. I take the Deputy's point on climate change, which is related to this issue.

Chairman: We are obliged to finish.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: One must deal with the scientific evidence on all fronts. There is no ambivalence in this respect. At present, in respect of cultivation, this is a GM-free island. This is a status that other countries-----

Chairman: The Minister of State should note we are obliged to finish.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: Yes. However, there is no ambivalence in this regard. As Minister of State I have responsibility for those who need GM feed, non-GM feed and organic feed, as well as for those who are trying to supply feed in Ireland at present. Essentially, everything that can be done in this regard is being done.

As for Ireland's abstention, its seven votes would not have changed the result in any event and the issue would have to be sent to the Commission. The real issue is whether Ireland wishes to be perceived as a country that promotes the clean green food island image or as a country that basically states it will give the GM industry whatever it wants. At present, we must look to our interests. That is the clear message.

Chairman: The Minister of State should conclude.

Deputy Seán Sherlock: Why did the Government abstain?

Chairman: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: The reason we abstained was that, at present, our meat is being bought in Italy and France. In Italy in particular, they insist on non-GM feed. Those countries abstained and a problem would have arisen had we declared support for GM crops, as it would have been perceived in those countries.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I am trying to answer another member's question.

Chairman: The Minister of State should be allowed to finish. This meeting must conclude.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: That is the reason. Had we voted in favour, it would have placed us in the bracket of being a pro-GM country that was selling to countries which had specified that our produce should be non-GM.

Deputy Seán Sherlock: Is the Minister of State suggesting that we are marketing Irish beef as being GM-free?

Chairman: Deputy, please.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: Yes. I refer the Deputy to Coop Italia. He should speak to Kepak in this regard.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Sargent, and his officials for the presentation and for answering the questions raised. This discussion has been most informative and of great assistance to members. I hope to return to this issue as soon as possible and the clerk to the joint committee will be in contact with the Minister of State's officials.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.55 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 26 February 2008.