

# **Speaking Up For Agriculture – Protecting Farming’s Social Licence**

A report for



**NUFFIELD IRELAND**

**Farming Scholarships**

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## Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to identify and examine the main threats to Irish agriculture’s social licence and recommend a strategy that will protect it for the benefit of Irish farmers, the agri-food sector and the entire nation.

While the protection of agriculture’s social licence to operate is not only of vital importance to those who are directly linked to the industry it has equal if not more significance to those who are outside of the industry. Agriculture’s positive contribution is wide and far reaching accounting for between 14 and 15% of total employment and creating €9.25 Billion of output in the national economy.

Ireland’s future economic growth and prosperity is directly linked to the success of its agricultural industry and as such the protection of farming’s social licence should be of concern to any industry, sector, business or person who has a stake in the Irish economy.

### Key Findings

- Social licence and its protection is becoming a major concern for the agricultural industry in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and The United States. Social licence refers to the level of public trust granted to an industry sector by the community at large and its key consumer base.
- Irish agriculture is a key driver of the Irish economy at both national and local level generating 14-15% of total employment and creating a total of 9.25 Billion of output in the economy.
- If achieved the ambitious targets set out for the industry in the Food Wise 2025 report will enhance and strengthen the Irish economy, this will benefit every citizen in the country and copper fasten agriculture’s position as one of the most important sectors in the national economy.
- Agriculture’s contribution to the social fabric of the country and in particular rural Ireland is as important as its economic contribution. Farming and farm families spend 8 Billion a year on inputs and living expenses this activity maintains jobs and communities in rural Ireland.
- There are four main threats to agriculture’s social license.

**1. Anti-agriculture activist groups** – Be they motivated by an environmental, animal rights or an anti-globalisation agenda, anti-agriculture activist groups share the same goal and the same strategy. That is to use all means necessary to create, and then leverage, negative public perception in order to pressurize and ultimately force a change to farming practices and methods of food production that do not fit their beliefs, standards or vision.

**2.Social Media and The Internet** – Today’s public and consumer is becoming more aware and interested in how their food is sourced, produced and processed. Social media and the internet is fast becoming the source for their research and information. If farming does not have a strong, united and credible voice in this space, the industry as a whole is leaving itself exposed to losing control of its own story and placing it in the hands of those who may have an anti-agriculture agenda.

**3.Increasing farm size** – The trend of larger farm size can be expected to continue and gather pace due in large to the targets set out in the Food Wise 2025 report, and the introduction of very favorable tax incentives aimed at encouraging a larger uptake of long term leasing agreements. Larger farms, however, become easier targets for those who seek to damage the image of Irish agriculture. Larger farms are quite often painted as environmentally damaging, inhumane and only profit motivated in order to create a disconnect between the farmer and the public.

**4.Failure of the Irish agricultural industry to recognize the public as a stakeholder** – The Food Wise 2025 report is a very positive, far reaching and progressive document. Within it lies the roadmap for the future growth and prosperity for the agri-food industry, and in turn the Irish economy. However, the Food Wise 2025 report does not recognise the Irish public as a stakeholder. This is a mistake. The targets held within the report are only achievable with the support, understanding and approval of the Irish public. The public must be part of the conversation and part of the process.

**Fig. 1** A Facebook post illustrating how easily an animal rights group can take a picture out of context in order to suit their agenda.



## Recommendations

In order to ensure the protection and further enhancement of agriculture’s social licence this report recommends the adoption of a five step strategy of:

- 1. Identifying farmer spokespeople** - Farmers are our industries most effective spokespeople, they are readily identified with and trusted by the public and as a result they are without doubt the most effective channel by which to communicate agriculture’s positive story.
- 2. Capacity Building** – Refers to the process of educating and equipping our spokespeople with the knowledge and skills so that they can be effective and authoritative spokespeople for our industry.
- 3. Identifying the issues** – Focus groups are an extremely effective way to identify the issues that concern the public. Once identified these concerns can then be addressed by our spokespeople and the industry at large.
- 4. Influencing the Influencers** – By reaching out to and educating key influencers and opinion leaders it is possible for our industry to reach a much broader audience than would otherwise be possible. By influencing the influencers we are in effect recruiting additional influential spokespeople for our industry.
- 5. Proactive Communications** – Agriculture must now take the front foot in communicating its value to the Irish public. It is no longer acceptable to only communicate agricultures value in the face of a crisis or in response to negative publicity. Adopting a policy of proactive communications ensures there is balance in the debate on agricultures impact, contribution and future.

## About The Author

My name is Brian Rushe and together with my wife Rebecca we have two sons John (4) and Rhys (2). In partnership with my parents John and Marcella, myself and Rebecca own and operate a dairy farm in County Kildare in the Irish midlands.

Unlike many farmers my immediate move after leaving school wasn’t to take a place in an agricultural college or agricultural degree course instead as my family is also involved in the retail sector I decided to take a place in a business studies and management course. Upon completing this course I entered employment in that part of the family business and I enjoyed it however I didn’t love it, I didn’t have a passion for it.

They say; “ you only know what you have when you lose it” for me this perfectly explained how I came to feel about farming. It wasn’t until I moved away from the farm that I truly realised that a career as a farmer was the path that would bring me true contentment in my working life. That was fourteen years ago and despite a number of speed bumps along the way it was the best decision I could have possibly made because today I find myself working in one of the the most exciting, challenging and opportunity filled industries in the world.

In the past few months I have been fortunate enough to be elected as Irish Farmers Association County Chairman for Kildare it’s a challenging and demanding role but it’s a role I am relishing and really enjoying. I am a firm believer that agriculture and in particular our farmers are the backbone and the engine that drives the Irish economy. My position within the IFA now allows me to defend and highlight this vital role that we play.

Unfortunately I have had to recently replace what was a fairly active rugby playing hobby with a less active but surprisingly equally as enjoyable (less bruises I guess!) rugby spectating career. However rather than getting excited about finding a replacement for my rugby playing I have a suspicion that the mixture of family, farming, Nuffield and IFA might be physically and mentally taxing enough!

## Acknowledgements

Firstly to my wife Rebecca who I am eternally grateful to because it was only with your support and understanding that this journey was possible. To my two sons, John and Rhys, although at times it seemed to me that you only started to make noise and looked to play with me when I sat down to write my report, I am prepared to forgive you on account of your age and the fact the two of you looked after your mammy so well while I was away...I look forward to the day that we get to revisit and together experience some of the amazing places I got to visit on my study tour.

To my Mam and Dad not only would my Nuffield Scholarship never have happened without your support but my farming career wouldn’t have been possible either. You have always backed any decision I have ever taken and I am forever grateful.

Mark, thank you for looking after the farm in my absence, you worked the hours, looked after the cows and got the silage made. I couldn’t have done any better myself.

To Nuffield Ireland, and in particular Bill O’Keeffe, John Tyrrell and my mentor Karen Brosnan, thank you for the help and support during my scholarship and thank you for the amazing opportunity that my Nuffield Scholarship has turned out to be, it has opened doors, provided me with new friends, broadened my mind and given me an extra shot of confidence to get involved in a part our industry that I otherwise would have considered out of reach.

After spending six weeks with me and enduring my endless list of bad habits I would like to both apologise and thank my 5 GFP travel companions for putting up with me. Andy, Jock, Tom, Satwant and Aidan I look forward to seeing you all again in the near future.

Finally, thank you so much to all the people who helped me in any way shape or form during the course of my study. I hope to someday be able to return the favour to you and please do not be shy in contacting me if you ever happen to be passing close by.

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## Foreword

As long as I remember I’ve always wanted to be a farmer and I, like hundreds and thousands of men and women around the world, feel incredibly privileged and proud to make my living in this industry. While I was never afraid to express this sentiment to any and all who would listen long enough to me, I have been frustrated at what I feel is the wider Irish Industries failure to highlight its value to the Irish public, and while we have become incredibly adept in marketing ourselves across the globe, we have, by and large, ignored our own people. These frustrations would regularly boil to the surface when in conversations with urban based family and friends.

At times, I would be confronted with information and questions that had its origin in an anti-agriculture Facebook post, Tweet or press release stating that milk contained antibiotics, meat contains hormones or that Irish farming was environmentally destructive. The emerging and growing trend of targeting large and conventional farms by activist groups and painting them as environmentally damaging, inhumane and corporate is also something that worries me. The tactic here, and in any attack on farming, is to create a disconnection between farmers and the public. This disconnection results in suspicion, mistrust and ultimately, if it is not addressed, the revocation of an operation’s social licence.

Like most farmers I presumed that reasonable people would see through the lies and misinformation, and that there was no need to think that any of this would become an issue. However, as anyone who is a user of social media will tell you, this is an issue which no longer can be ignored.

A person cannot do a Google search for a simple term such as dairy farming, without being confronted by pages of results bearing an anti-agriculture agenda. No matter where you look on Facebook or Twitter, you cannot help but be confronted with a video, or post, attacking farming’s credibility.

And now, most worrying of all, we are now seeing advertising campaigns in our cities and universities portraying farming as a cruel and inhumane business. If we are not equally as proactive and engaging in telling our side of the story, we have no one but ourselves to blame if public perception and opinion turns against our industry.

We need only look at New Zealand’s dairy industry, and its labelling as “Dirty Dairying”, to see the results of standing back and allowing agriculture’s opponents continue to spread their message unchallenged. Can you imagine the damage to our domestic and international reputation if Irish agriculture was labelled with a similar moniker?

My study travels took me to Australia, Singapore, The Philippines, China, Canada, The United States and Italy. In these countries I had the opportunity to meet key people involved in community engagement and communications programmes in industry bodies and in multinational companies including Meat and Livestock Australia and The National Farmers Federation in Australia, ‘Agriculture More Than Ever’ in Canada and Monsanto in the United States. In the course of all of these meeting and interviews I asked one common question:

*“Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently if you were to start the process of community engagement again?”*

The answer was the same in each and every case;

*“We should have started sooner”*

The single biggest ‘take-home message’ from my study was the importance of being proactive with agriculture’s positive story, so as to ensure there is a balance in the debate and the conversation about farming’s contribution and future. Reacting in times of crises is simply not enough. We need to be a constant presence in what is becoming an increasingly negative and one-sided debate.

We are an ambitious sector led by ambitious farmers, who are ready and willing to take on the challenge set out for it by the Food Wise 2025 report. Before us lies massive opportunity, but it is an opportunity that can only be fully realised with the consent, understanding and full support of the Irish public.

***“Don’t wait for a problem, engage with the community be visible and show your value”***

*Daniel Kniffen Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Dairy and Animal Science. Pennsylvania State University*

# 1. What Is Social Licence?

The concept of Social Licence or Social Licence to Operate was first proposed by a Canadian mining executive Jim Cooney in 1997 as an essential requirement for the future survival of the mining industry. In essence social licence was then and still is now a metaphor for the quality of relationship between a mining project and the community in which it is situated.<sup>1</sup> Social Licence is not granted by government and it is not required legislation but without it a project, sector or industries growth potential is severely limited.

In Ireland today whether we like it or not farmers, farming and the wider industry now rely on the public trust for their right to operate and to expand their businesses this is otherwise known as their Social Licence.

Social Licence can be defined as:

*“Social Licence refers to the level of public trust granted to a corporate entity or industry sector by the community at large and its key consumer base.*

*Public trust is the belief that activities are consistent with social expectations and the values of stakeholders, and earned through industry engagement, operating practices, and expressed values.”*

Menzies. (2015). What does "social license" mean for agriculture? Available: <http://www.realdirtblog.ca/what-does-social-license-mean-for-agriculture/>. Last accessed 4th Jan 2015.

Social licence is created through proactive and effective communication, meaningful dialogue and ethical, responsible behavior. Social licence is slow to build, but can be very quick to erode. The single biggest threat to it is when there is a real or perceived disconnect between the values of our stakeholders and the values of our industry. An industry or sector can never operate to its full potential unless social licence is granted or restored. Agriculture’s opponents and critics know this, and they garner support for their cause by creating that perceived disconnect in values between our most important stakeholders and the industry.

In the context of the Irish agricultural industry, social licence is granted to us by our most important stakeholder; the Irish public. Without their support, our industry will never achieve its full potential, and this is something that would not only affect the viability and profitability of our farmers, but also that of our agri-food industry.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.internationalresourcejournal.com](http://www.internationalresourcejournal.com) Corporate Social Responsibility by Ian Thompson with Robert Boutiller and Leonora Black

## 2. Why it is Important to Irish Farming

While the protection of agriculture’s social licence to operate is not only of vital importance to those who are directly linked to the industry it has equal if not more significance to those who are outside of the industry. Agriculture in some form or another, has a presence in every corner of our island. Its economic impact is massive and far reaching, and it is fair to conclude that its positive contribution to the Irish economy benefits the entire population of this island.

Farming’s social licence needs to be protected not only to secure and protect its current contribution to the economy but also to ensure it can continue to grow, fulfil its potential and reach the targets set out for it in the Food Wise 2025 report.

### 2.1 Agriculture’s Current Contribution to The Irish Economy

Agriculture is Ireland’s largest indigenous industry it is the number one driver of the rural economy and a major contributor to the national economy. While its value to the economy can be relatively easily measured, the social benefits it creates are incalculable.

When we look at how agriculture benefits the economy it is useful to split that analysis into two parts; benefits to the national economy and the benefits to the local economy.

According to the IFA commissioned 2011 UCD report “The Importance of Agriculture and the Food Industry to the Irish Economy”, the main economic benefits of the industry to the national economy are:

- Agriculture and the agri-food industry provides 14-15% of total employment – between 287,000 and 308,000 jobs.
- Every €100 of agricultural output creates an additional €73 of output in the wider economy-creating a total of €9.25 billion output in the Irish economy
- Every €100 of agricultural output produces €97 of GNP.

It is also worth noting the significance of agriculture’s output multiplier when discussing the industries contribution. The output multiplier is a measure of how much output is generated in other sectors in order to produce €1 of agricultural output. For every €1 worth of output from Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, €1.734 of output in total is created in the economy.

The average multiplier for all other sectors excluding Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing is €1.47. From these figures it can clearly be seen that Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing has a production impact 18% higher than all of the other sectors combined.

When we look at farming’s impact on the local economy, it is fair to say that it’s contribution is equally as important. According to the same UCD report, farming and farmers spend €8 billion per annum on agricultural inputs and living expenses, the majority of which are purchased within 35 kilometres of the farm.

## 2.2 The Food Wise 2025 Report and Future Growth Potential

In July of 2015, the Food Wise 2025 report was officially launched by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny who stated;

*“The Government is rebuilding an economy that is enterprise focused and can support sustainable full employment by 2018. This means growing each enterprise sector across the economy and creating jobs in all four corners of Ireland. Ireland’s agri-food industry has led the way in Ireland’s recovery. Food Wise 2025 builds on this success by identifying smarter and greener ways to deliver sustainable growth so that it can contribute to our ongoing recovery.”*

Within this report lies a roadmap for the projected growth of our primary production, agri-food and value add sectors. The headline growth targets are:

- Increasing the value of agri-food exports by 85% to €19 billion.
- Increasing the value add in the agri-food, fisheries and wood products sector by 70% to in excess of €13 billion.
- Increasing the value of primary production by 65% to almost €10 billion.
- The creation of an additional 23,000 direct jobs in the agri-food sector all along the supply chain from primary production right up to high value added product development.

If these growth projections are achieved, the entire country has the potential to benefit. Agriculture has a place in every parish, village and town in the country. When agriculture thrives, the economy thrives. Food Wise 2025 is an ambitious and forward thinking report. It clearly sets out a path forward for Irish agriculture and places the industry front and centre as one of the key drivers of the Irish economy.

***“Prosperous farmers make for a prosperous nation and when farmers are in trouble the nation is in trouble”***

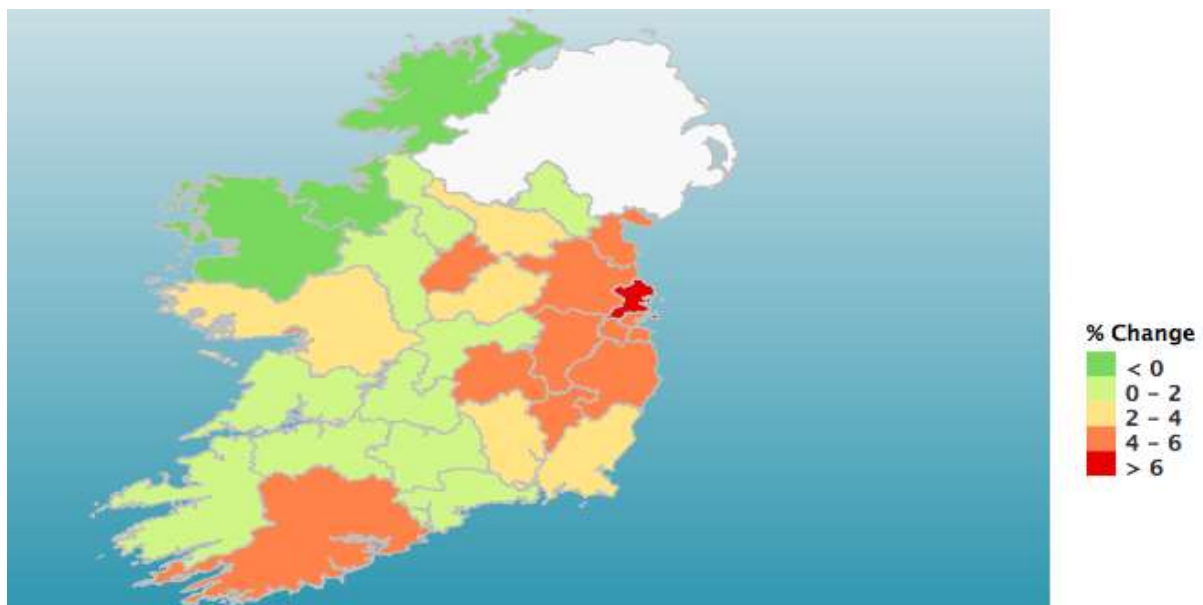
*President Harry Truman*

### 2.3 Agriculture’s Social Contribution

The economic activity generated by agriculture in our rural communities creates and maintains jobs in these areas. As stated previously farmers and farm families spend €8 billion a year on inputs and living expenses, this activity creates jobs. These jobs in turn gives families the opportunity to work and live in the area in which they were born and raised ensuring the survival of villages, GAA clubs, parishes and communities the length and breadth of the country.

This assertion is supported by the preliminary results from the 2016 census, which showed that just three counties; Donegal, Sligo and Mayo have experienced a decline in population in the period 2011-2016 and when we exclude the main population centres of Dublin, Waterford city, Galway city and Cork city the average population growth per county is 2.4%.

**Fig 2.** Map showing percentage population change per county 2011-2016.



Source: CSO

## 3. What Are the Threats to Irish Farming’s Social Licence?

During the course of the authors study, social licence and its potential loss or revocation was consistently named by interviewees as one of the key threats to their businesses. Social license is widely recognised to be as important as access to capital, access to labour, and commodity prices.

In short, in countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and The United States, which are broadly similar to Ireland in terms of consumer attitude, internet access and usage and age demographics, farmers and the industry recognise that in order to ensure the continued unhindered growth of their sector, they must dedicate substantial time and resources to protecting their reputation and communicating their value.

In Ireland, our industry is well versed and prepared for the challenges posed to it by capital, labour and commodity prices. However, it is the firm belief of the author that we lack the same level of preparedness when it comes to protecting our reputation and securing our social licence.

*“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”*

*Warren Buffett*

This report identifies four main threats to Irish farming’s social license

1. Anti-Agriculture Activist Groups
2. Social Media and the Internet
3. Increasing farm size
4. Failure of the Irish Industry to recognise the public as a stakeholder

### 3.1 Anti-Agriculture Activist Groups

Anti-agriculture groups exist in a many different forms and they lobby against agriculture on a wide range of issues, but without doubt, their two main targets are animal rights and or liberation and environmental issues. When we look at these groups in isolation it would

appear that they lobby on a variety of different issues. However, regardless of a group’s apparent focus, make no mistake, their ultimate agenda is common across the board and that is to use all means within their disposal to discredit farming and the agri-food industry in order to force their vision of agriculture and food production onto the targeted sector.

The tactics employed by these groups can only be described as cynical at best. They understand that their ultimate goal is not widely accepted by the general population. So, they have pursued the tactic of, bit by bit, trying to make life harder on farmers and the wider industry, by hiding behind issues that are more acceptable and heretofore, they have been successful in making those issues seem much bigger than what they actually are.

Examples of this would include portraying an image or video of mistreatment of animals as an industry norm, taking an image out of context and attempting to discredit an industries environmental credentials with dubious science, half-truths or selective information.

They continuously target the public with fear and guilt with the hope of triggering a negative emotional response, and over time eventually changing a misinformed publics perceptions, spending and consumption habits.

**Fig. 3** A series of advertisements that have appeared in Dublin over the last 12 months







Activist groups are playing the long game. Their strategy of chipping away at agriculture’s credibility has been very successful, and worryingly they have now begun to target the easily influenced, and in particular, secondary school children and college students. This is a

common strategy across all these type of groups because they rightly recognise know that the school children and the students of today are the decision makers, legislators and influencers of the future.

Below is an infomercial that appeared in the UCD College Tribune which has a circulation of 30,000.

**Fig. 4** UCD College Tribune Infomercial



**GOVEGAN.ie**

**DAIRY TAKES BABIES FROM THEIR MOTHERS**

LIKE HUMANS, cows produce milk only following pregnancy and birth, and only for the purpose of feeding their babies. Unlike humans, dairy cows are forcibly impregnated by a process that, were it done to humans, would be termed rape.

FOLLOWING EACH BIRTH, a mother cow is separated from her infant so that her breast milk can be consumed by adults of another species.

HER SONS are used for their flesh. Her daughters are raised apart from her to replace her in the production line.

She never gets to nurse her children, nurture them, or watch them grow.

When – exhausted by endless cycles of forced pregnancy, difficult birth, constant lactation, traumatic loss, and grieving – her body breaks, her spirit gives, and her milk production declines, she is slaughtered. She is less than 7 years old; a young adult whose natural lifespan would have been 20-25 years.

**YOU CAN END THIS INJUSTICE BY ENDING YOUR DEMAND FOR ITS CRUEL PRODUCTS. GO VEGAN**

Whether we think they are misinformed or not it would be a mistake to take them for granted and not recognise the threat that they pose. The support they garner from celebrities and media personalities gives them credibility in the eyes of the public.

They are every bit as passionate about their cause as we are about ours, they are dedicated, well-funded, they genuinely believe that what they are saying is true and that they hold the moral high ground.

### 3.2 The Internet and Social Media

Today, more and more consumers are seeking out detailed information about where their food comes from, and how it is produced. But where are consumers going for their research and information? The answer; The Internet and Social Media.

Published in June of 2016 the Reuters Institute Digital News Report stated:

- Facebook is now Ireland’s most popular social media site, with 71% using it regularly and 45% using it as a source for news. Participation in online news is also high in Ireland, with 72% frequently rating, sharing and commenting on online news stories.
- TV remains the most popular platform for accessing news in Ireland, at 73%, although this marks a 3% decline on the 2015 figure. Social media as a news platform rose by 3% to 52% when compared with the 2015 survey. Radio and print have declined slightly at 47% and 45% respectively.

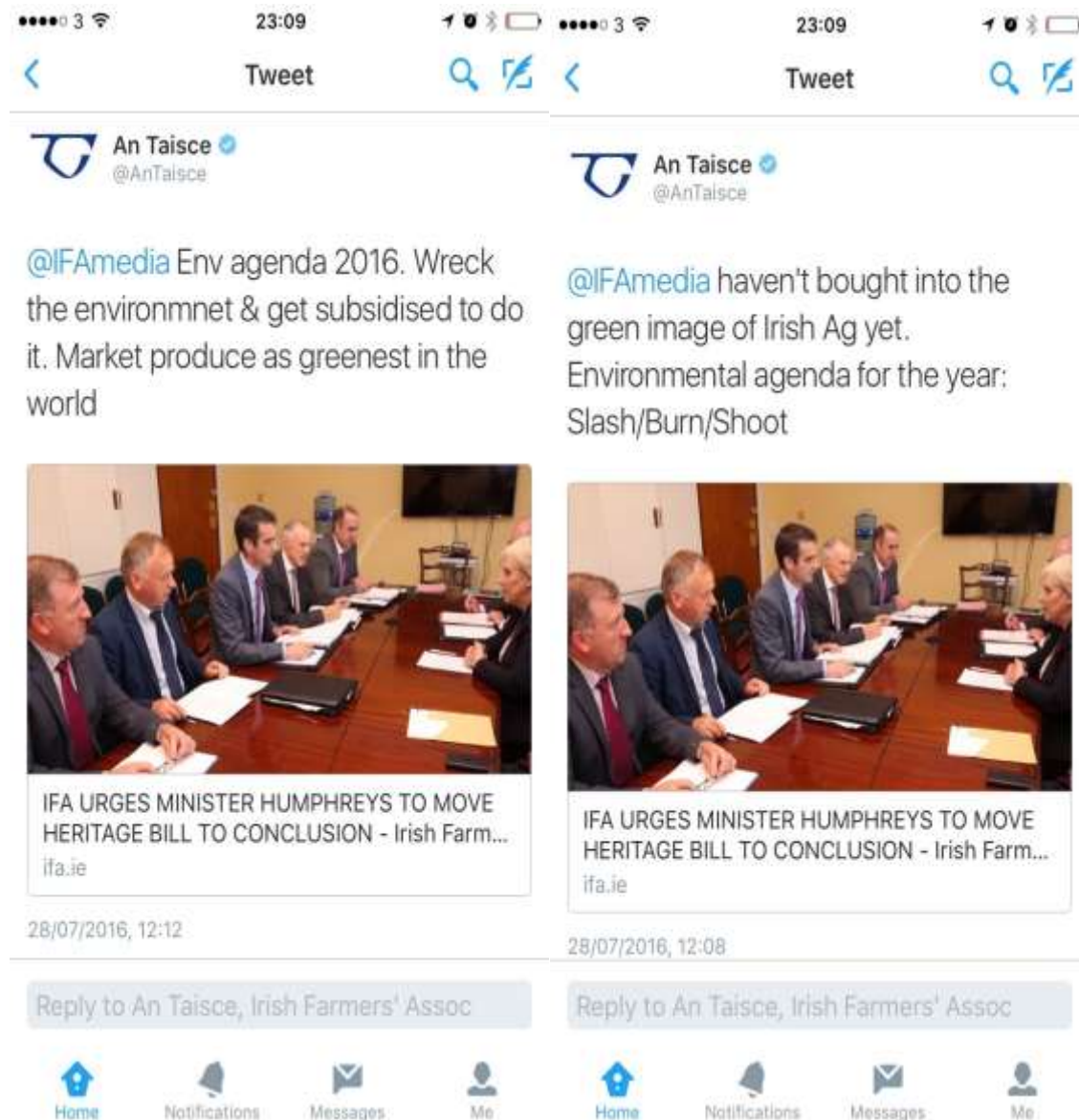
Given the above research and the instant access to information on the move that a smart phone now gives, it is safe to assume that consumers are not only turning to social media and the internet for their news, they are also using it to find answers to question that concern them. This has the potential to cause serious issues for agriculture in Ireland.

It is of paramount importance that agriculture has a strong, engaging and sympathetic presence on the internet and in particular social media. If we are not present on social media, we run the risk of losing control of our own story and placing it in the hands of groups and people who will twist and misrepresent it to suit their own agenda.

It has become virtually impossible to scroll down a Facebook or Twitter timeline without being bombarded with numerous posts spouting an anti-agriculture agenda. A concerned member of the public cannot do a Google or a social media search for topics like live exports, dairy calves, glyphosate or climate change without being faced with a page full of articles loaded with some form of anti-agriculture agenda.

To the informed it is easy to pick out the factual from the fictional and sentimental, however, the uninformed will click on the first article on the first page that catches their eye, and unfortunately it is usually the negative and sensational that catches their eye first.

**Fig. 5** Tweets from An Taisce from July 2016 attacking IFA environmental policy and attempting to discredit Irish farming’s environmental track record



Before social media, anti-agriculture groups needed to be well funded and have a large amount of activists on the ground to carry and spread their message. This is no longer the case. Social media has now given the individual a voice and quite often a single activist with a well-timed opportunistic tweet or Facebook post can have as big a negative impact as a well-funded and publicized campaign undertaken by PETA or the Humane Society of the United States.



Social Media has no borders, and this means that a campaign by an activist group in Australia, New Zealand or anywhere else in the world has the potential to have as big an impact in Ireland as it would in the country where it originated. A prime example of this is the bobby calf campaign carried out by SAFE in New Zealand. This campaign highlighted inexcusable cruelty carried out on male dairy calves by a very small number of individuals.

SAFE’s number one aim with this campaign was to influence the public into thinking that this was common practice across the New Zealand dairy industry and in the process label all dairy farming as inhumane and cruel. With the help of social media this campaign succeeded in going viral, and received considerable coverage in Ireland and the UK.

When a member of the public sees a campaign like this they will jump to conclusions. In the absence of an equally strong and vocal pro-agriculture voice on social media, we cannot blame them for presuming the worse and concluding that abuses like the ones highlighted by activist groups are common practice in our industry.

**Fig. 6** An Image from SAFE’s campaign which was widely spread on social media



### 3.3 Increasing Farm Size

Reduced commodity prices, increased input prices and, most significantly, a shortage of people choosing farming as a career, have led to the growing trend of increasing farm size in Ireland. While increased farm size will result in improved efficiency, productivity and depending on the sector increased employment, it also means there will be a reduced number of farmers and farm families.

According to the 2010 census of agriculture, published by the CSO in the period 1991-2000, the number of farms in Ireland dropped from approximately 170,000 to 141,527 in 2000, at the same time average farm size increased to 31 hectares from an average of 26. The rate of consolidation slowed considerably in the period 2000-2010, with the number of farms falling by just 1667 holdings, to a total of 139,860 with average farm size increasing by 2 hectares to an average size of 33 hectares.

With the removal of milk quotas in April 2015 and the introduction of tax incentives to encourage long term leasing, it is reasonable to suggest that the pace of farm consolidation will increase once more.

Those with an anti-agriculture agenda often paint large farms as environmentally damaging, cruel to livestock and driven by profit alone. They will always use terms like factory or corporate farms when describing large operations, this is a very deliberate strategy and their end goal here is to make the public think that these type of farms are no longer family owned and operated but instead owned and operated by large faceless corporations with no other consideration but profit.

Increasing farm sizes is not only a challenge for our farmers but also for many of our food exporters none more so than Ornuia. Ornuia manufactures and sells Kerrygold branded products in over 80 countries. No other brand is as inextricably linked to Ireland as Kerrygold.

The positive image and perception that people have of Irish farming is a key factor in Kerrygold’s success worldwide, and there can be no doubt that Ornuia’s growth has been built on the back of the story of small, grass fed family run Irish dairy farms. This is Kerrygold’s market differentiation or unique selling point.

The changing face of Irish farming and the challenge that it poses was acknowledged by Kevin Lane the CEO of Ornuia in an interview he gave on RTE radio’s Countrywide programme on

the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2016. When asked did he see increasing herd and farm sizes as a possible issue for the Kerrygold brand he answered

*“It is a challenge, in a post quota environment Irish farmers are going to produce more milk, they will produce it more efficiently and there will be consolidation and larger farms”*

Bigger farms become bigger and easier targets and any attack on these farms also has the potential to do real damage to any brands that use and benefit from Irish farming’s positive global image.

**Fig. 7** Kerrygold cheese in a Spanish supermarket



### 3.4 Failure of the Irish Industry to Recognise the Public as a Stakeholder

The single most important stakeholder group to the Irish farming and agri-food industry is the Irish public. Without their trust, understanding and support the type of growth targeted in the Food Wise 2025 report is merely an aspiration.

The headline target in the Food Wise 2025 report is to grow agri-food exports by 85% to €19 billion and in order to achieve this, the report targets a growth in primary production of 65% to almost €10 billion. Both are extremely ambitious projections and the subsequent economic output generated from this additional activity will benefit every corner of the country.

The delivery of the projections for export growth rest on farming and the rest of the primary production sector achieving their growth targets. However the scale of growth targeted by the report in the primary production sector can only be achieved if the public grant it the social licence to do so.

In the Food Wise 2025 report it states

*“A SWOT analysis identifies clear challenges and opportunities which must be addressed and supported so that strengths are enhanced and to create the environment for the industry to thrive”*

**Fig. 8** Food Wise 2025 SWOT analysis





Nowhere in the Food Wise 2025 SWOT analysis is reference to changing public perception or public opposition recognised as either a threat or a weakness.

Due in large degree to the massive international success and recognition of Bord Bia’s Origin Green initiative, our Industry has been extremely effective and successful at business-to-business engagement and telling our story to an international audience.

However, we have by and large ignored our own people. Without knowing or having access to a farmer, consumers and the public will turn to social media and Google for the answers to their questions. Once this happens, we lose all control of the story and leave the door open for agriculture’s opponents to tell it for us.

It is the opinion of the author that the entire industry is guilty of taking the trust of the Irish public for granted.

If we want to grow, we must include the public in the conversation and include them in the process. The projected growth in the Food Wise 2025 report will benefit the entire population and it is vital we are proactive in communicating this.

## 4. Protecting Farming’s Social Licence

Protecting agriculture’s social licence requires a five step strategy of identifying farmer spokespeople, building capacity within our spokespeople, identifying the issues facing our industry, influencing the influencers and, finally, taking the front foot at every opportunity to proactively communicate farming’s story and its vital contribution to the economic and social wellbeing of the nation.

### 4.1 Let the Farmers Do The Talking

People are naturally suspicious of spokespeople representing organisations, companies and industry lobby groups, because they cannot readily identify with them, and they perceive them to have an agenda which might not align with their own values.

Trust is achieved through commonalities and shared values, and it is only when we highlight our shared values with the public that we can truly gain credibility. In the eyes of the public, farmers and farm families are agriculture’s most credible and trustworthy spokespeople.

***“People don’t buy what you do or how you do it, they buy why you do it”***

*Simon Sinek*

More often than not, when an Industry spokesperson speaks to the public they communicate on what the industry does and how it does it, they use technical details, facts and statistics in order to tell their story. This strategy only facilitates a widening of the gap between agriculture and the public because we fail to trigger a connection with the target audience.

Every single time we try to communicate agriculture’s story we must strive to achieve the exact opposite of what agriculture’s opponents are attempting to achieve, and that is to trigger a positive emotional response.....”**People don’t buy what you do or how you do it”**

When a farmer tells the story of agriculture, the public see and hear from a family man or woman They see someone who is worried and concerned about the health of their children, they see someone who is striving to provide the best opportunities for their children and they see someone who is completely ingrained in the community in which they live. These shared values are the commonalities that farmers share with the public, and its only when we highlight this do we make a connection with our audience and we can begin to build trust and earn credibility.....”**People buy why you do it”**

#### 4.1.1 Identifying Spokespeople

Farmers by their very nature are largely reluctant to stick their head above the parapet and speak out. All too often, when farmers are asked to get involved in groups or organisations, they can’t, as they are too busy or simply do not have the time. This must change.

Farmers can no longer blame the consumer or the public for their lack of agricultural knowledge, especially now that the public are actively seeking that kind of information. However, this challenge of identifying and encouraging farmers to speak out does not only rest with the farmers themselves, it is also the responsibility of all those who benefit and rely on the primary production sector.

This process must include all stakeholders within the agri-food industry, including lobby groups, industry bodies, co-ops and processors.

There are plenty of farmers involved in our lobby groups, working with our industry bodies and sitting on co-op committees and boards who would make exceptional spokespeople.

The key is to give these farmers the encouragement and support to become spokespeople and equip them so that they feel confident enough to speak out without the label of an organisation or grouping.

By telling their own farming story they will automatically become spokespeople for not only their own farm and business, but also the entire agri-food industry.

#### 4.2 Capacity Building

After the process of identifying suitable farmers is complete, the next step is to build capacity in our new spokespeople. In this context ‘capacity building’ can be defined as:

*“The process of equipping people with the understanding and skills, and the access to information and knowledge to perform effectively. It includes motivating people to operate constructively and efficiently through the development of positive attitudes and progressive approaches to responsibility and productivity.”*

Patrick Wakely. (). *Capacity Building for Better Cities*. Available: <http://www.gdrc.org/uem/capacity-build.html>. Last accessed 16th Aug 2017.

Building Capacity in our spokespeople means providing them with ongoing training and resources so that they can become authoritative and confident public speakers. The type of

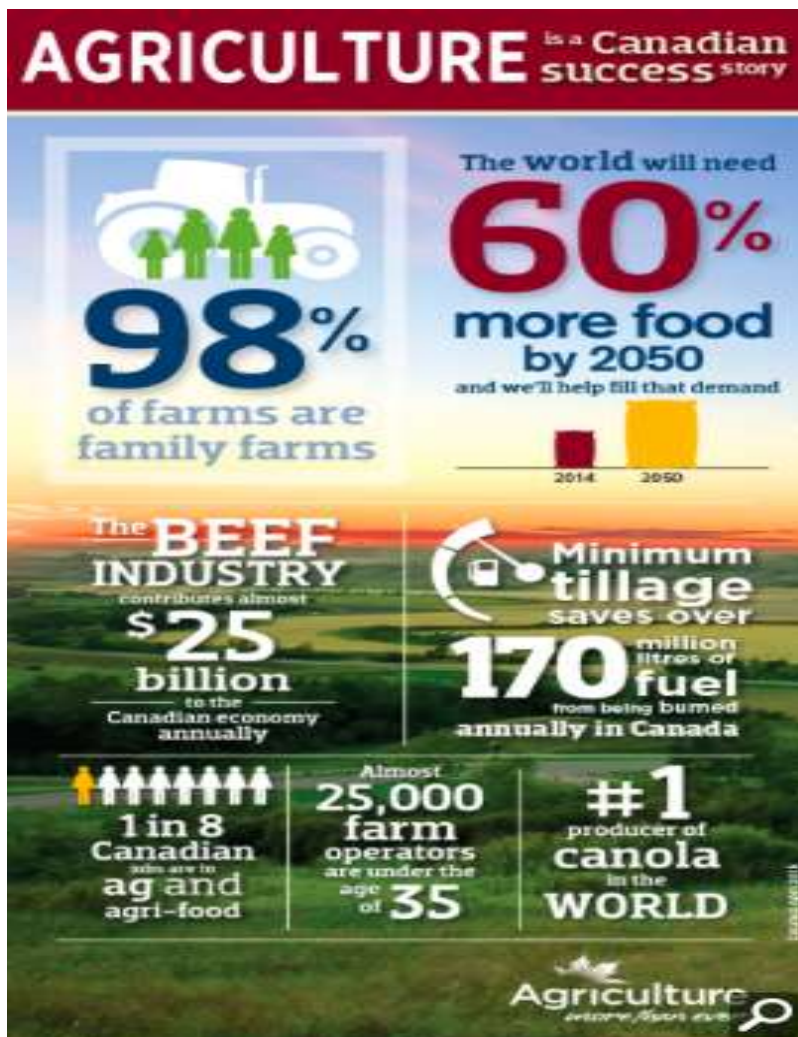
training involved would generally consist of public speaking, media and social media training. This would also be supported by updating our spokespeople with resource material containing key facts and statistics specific to their sector or area of expertise.

Not only is capacity building possible for identified and recruited spokespeople, by including resource material online or as supplements in our farming press we can build capacity in thousands of farmers across the country and arm them with key statistics about agriculture that they can then use in conversation with the public either in person or online via social media.

The process of capacity building should be ongoing; it doesn’t have to be costly but it does have to be consistent. Small things like weekly emails or newsletters containing tips and reminders of their training while also providing encouragement to get out and speak up can have a big impact for very little cost.

**Fig. 9** Examples of resource material provided to Canadian farmers by ‘Ag More Than Ever’





### 4.3 Identifying the Issues

To make sure our spokespeople are effective it is vital that they are aware of the issues that cause the most concern with the public. The best way to gather this information is to use focus groups of varying demographics on a regular basis.

These groups are an extremely important tool in gauging opinion and identifying the key issues that our spokespeople need to address in public speaking events or simply in an informal conversation with a concerned member of the public.

In order to keep up to date with public opinion these focus groups ideally would be held on a biannual basis, and the information gathered from them would then be made available to our spokespeople and other key people within the industry.

#### 4.4 Influencing the Influencers

Influencers and opinion leaders are the people that the public turn to when they have a question, a worry or when they need advice, by their actions and choices key influencers also have the power to shape the consumption habits, attitudes and decisions of today’s public.

Key influencers and opinion leaders would include but are not exclusive to doctors, nurses, dieticians, chefs, journalists, media personalities and bloggers. By educating and influencing key influencers and opinion leaders as to the processes, story and value of agriculture it is possible for the industry to reach, educate and influence a much larger audience than what would otherwise be possible.

Farm tours are an open and transparent way to pursue this strategy. By getting opinion leaders, influencers, journalists etc. on to real commercial farms we are both building relationships that will be useful in the future and showing first-hand that farming has nothing to hide.

By focussing on and building trust and relationships with people in positions of influence, we are in effect recruiting spokespeople that will communicate our industries value to a section of the public that might otherwise not engage with the farming community.

#### 4.5 Proactive Communications

The fifth and final part in the strategy of communicating agriculture’s value and protecting its social licence is proactive communications. Proactive communications means taking the front foot in speaking up about agriculture.

By doing this we ensure that our story is present in the conversation at all times and it is not just a case of spokespeople for the industry speaking up in times of crisis or because of negative publicity. Being proactive means we keep balance in the debate, shows the public we are transparent and gives our story and message credibility.

***“If we are not part of the conversation it is almost impossible to rebalance the debate once it has gathered pace without looking like we had something to hide”***

*Sarah McKinnon, National Farmers Federation Australia*

As stated previously, agriculture plays a massive and vital role in the economic and social wellbeing of our nation. This is an incredibly positive and powerful story and yet it is rarely

publicised. Why is it, that the only time we hear of agriculture’s importance is in response to some sort of negative publicity or difficulty for the sector? This has to change.

We cannot complain about the public or public representatives having a negative view of the industry if the only time they ever hear from us it is because of a response to some degree of negativity. Negative and defensive language results in a negative perception and this is something we cannot afford to let happen.

By having an ever present positive voice in the debate surrounding agriculture, it places our industry in a position of considerable strength in defending the interests of primary producers and the wider industry.

The most effective means by which to proactively communicate agricultures value are:

- **Provide opportunities for farmer spokespeople to speak**

Urban schools, food festivals and any gathering that would be attended by a largely urban audience are ideal opportunities for our farmer spokespeople to meet and speak to an audience that otherwise would never have the opportunity to hear from and connect with a farmer.

- **Establish a speakers panel made up of trained farmer spokespeople**

Form a speakers’ panel of all of the spokespeople that have gone through training. This panel would then become the ‘go to’ resource for our industry and the media when a spokesperson is required for an interview, statement, comment or a public speaking event.

- **Targeted media campaign highlighting agriculture’s value to the economy**

A national online, print and advertising campaign highlighting how the public benefits from agriculture through a strong economy and job creation is another way for our industry to connect with the general public and illustrate that what’s good for farming is good for them.

- **Facilitate and finance real farmers in opening their farms to the public.**

Open farms are particularly effective as an education tool for school children. By facilitating and financing open farm tours we are showing transparency, allowing people to meet real farmers and exposing people to a real farming environment.

It is important that in order to include all sectors and production systems in this process. That means both organic and conventional, intensive or extensive should be promoted equally, there is a space for every farming system and it is important we communicate that point clearly to the public.



## 5. Conclusion

While the Irish agri-food sector and those that make their living from it could be forgiven for thinking that this is an issue that doesn’t warrant a serious level of concern, experience from other countries would tell us that this is a complacent and irresponsible attitude.

Social licence, its maintenance and protection in the face of attack by anti-agriculture groups and changing public perceptions has become a major issue for the industry in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. It is the firm belief of the author that the same challenges now face our own industry.

Irish farming and the resulting economic activity has a massive positive spin off both economically and socially for the entire island of Ireland and when we look at the targets contained within the Food Wise 2025 report these benefits could be amplified even further resulting in not only a strong national economy but a strong and socially sustainable rural economy.

However, our industry does have its opponents and their voices are getting louder, their criticisms are gaining credibility and people are beginning to listen and to be influenced.

While there are agencies in Ireland working in this area, the strategic approach by the resource allocators and all of industry needs to be revised and prioritised to meet the pace of the anti-agriculture lobbying groups.

In order to face-off and to combat these criticisms, this report has put forward and recommended the adoption of a five step strategy:

1. Identifying farmer spokespeople
2. Building capacity in our spokespeople
3. Identifying the issues
4. Influencing the influencers
5. Proactive communications

Each of these steps is as important as the other, so in order for this strategy to be effective, it has to be adopted as a complete package of measures. It is also important to learn and benchmark our strategy against the challenges and successes of our international peers.

However, it is not equitable or fair to expect the primary producer to carry the full burden of this cause. The adoption and implementation of this strategy is in the interests of all who rely on agriculture’s positive image, growth and continued success.

While this of course includes farmers it also includes co-ops, processors, lobby groups, exporters and as such should receive their full support and backing.

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