

## **AGRICULTURE AND FOOD PRODUCTION IN THE DUBLIN REGION**

### **Address by Councillor May McKeon to the PURPLE General Assembly, The Hague, May 2010**

The Dublin Region which consists of Dublin City, Fingal, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown and South Dublin is the home of horticultural production in Ireland. Horticulture is an activity long associated with North County Dublin (Dublin's main peri-urban area) and I will come back to this in more detail shortly. However, I would like to present some facts on agricultural production within the Region.

Firstly, average farm size in Dublin is now estimated at over 43 Hectares, up from 33 Hectares in 1990. This is both a reflection of the decline in numbers of small farm holdings and also of the consolidation and intensification of overall farming activity. However, at the same time, the total area of land being cultivated has fallen from approximately 34,000 Hectares to 27,000 Hectares. This may be due to the increased need for development land as a consequence of the growth of Dublin in recent times.

Secondly, data from the last agricultural census in 2000 showed that commercial operators in Fingal, which is the main agricultural area of the Dublin Region, were mainly specialist tillage and beef production operators. There are also a significant number of farms engaged in specialist horticulture and fruit production. Unlike other agricultural sectors nearly all domestic production in the region is for the home market.

Thirdly, and with regard to horticulture, Dublin accounted for about 30% of national field vegetable growers and 40% production at the last time of counting (Bord Bia, the Irish Food Board). Our area has the advantage of good quality soil which is important for vegetable growing and the produce is almost exclusively for the Dublin market - both retail and prepared foods. Our growers are generally not as large scale as competitors in countries such as the UK, Spain and the Netherlands and, therefore, may be vulnerable in terms of price. A new agricultural census is due in 2010 (these are carried out every 10 years) and will further inform us about the current state of agriculture in the region.

So while the production figures I quoted above are of relevance in terms of the contribution of our region to horticultural production nationally, I would also like to speak to you now about the values of urban agriculture.

I believe there is a basic need for every person to have a sense of security about where their food comes from and that it is safe and this need is often satisfied by growing your own nourishment.

Back in 1926 almost 70% of the population lived in rural areas. Today well over 60% of the population live in **urban** areas. In the space of 85 years the urban-rural divide has inverted. In modern society the value of growing your own food and self sufficiency is often overlooked or undervalued, however, given the current recessionary times we all live in, this activity may well become a new growth area.

Indeed, food markets, a long-time common sight in Dublin city centre, are appearing with much more frequency across regional towns. This has been driven by increased public interest in self sufficiency, and a desire for fresh and affordable locally produced foodstuffs and green oriented activities, both within city and peri urban populations.

For example, the *"Grow It Yourself"* initiative was started in 2008 and is sweeping across the country. There are now over 40 groups nationally involved. *"Grow it Yourself"* is a not-for-profit organisation which promotes and facilitates back-garden food growing. *"Grow it Yourself"* groups are now present in Swords in North Dublin, Dublin City and in the peri-urban parts of South Dublin. In fact, this initiative has got the backing of celebrity chefs and gardeners back in Ireland.

Local county councils and private operators also supply allotments to communities throughout the region. One such is example is *"Fingal Allotments"* which is based in the North of the region and a private venture. *"Fingal Allotments"* also plan to offer picnic and barbeque areas and the facility to sell your produce in local Farmers Markets. New public allotments were made available in Fingal within the last year and demand is reportedly huge. More are in the pipeline and Fingal County Council

now provides over 600 public allotments. Irrespective of location, it is increasingly important that policies are put in place to create attractive destinations and that neighbourhood value is created and maintained. The encouragement of gardening activities at community level across the region is one way to achieve this goal be it within urban, peri-urban or traditional rural locations.

Now, more than ever before, the market is driving the green agenda. This will undoubtedly give locally based green initiatives the economic legs to survive and persist. However, it is not just economic benefit that will result from the promotion and development of peri-urban Dublin and green oriented activities, there are also significant health benefits to be gained. Childhood and adult obesity has been increasing in Ireland. Modern urban lifestyles have resulted in more inactive lifestyles such as watching television, playing computer games and consumption of fatty foods.

Proper integrated planning and transport can result in physically bringing traditional rural activities into urban areas, in a sustainable manner and the peri-urban countryside is the melting pot for these activities and the bridge between urban and rural areas.

Politically, here in Ireland, the importance of horticulture is reflected in the appointment of a Government Minister for Sustainable Transport, Horticulture, Planning and Heritage. This Minister primarily has responsibility for carrying out the Department of Transport's "Smarter Travel" vision for sustainable transport in Ireland. However, rest assured the Dublin Regional Authority intends to point up to this new Ministry the value of integrating sustainable transport routes and planning with urban and peri-urban markets and activities. This will not only lead to greater recognition of the role of agricultural production in our region but hopefully help raise awareness of how peri-urban areas through careful planning can lead to a reduction in our regions per capita ecological footprint, can contribute to regional economic growth and can improve the quality of living of our regions inhabitants.

Thank you