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NDC Opinion Article

**SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION, NOT SACRIFICED FOOD PRODUCTION**  
**Zoë Kavanagh, CEO, National Dairy Council**

Irish dairy is working hard to address the emissions targets it has been set – with reductions in fertiliser use, cattle breeding programmes, pasture management – and, lest we forget, the industry’s GHG emissions efficiency has already improved 10% in the last eight years.

More recently, reports from research carried out by VistaMilk put forward the view that Ireland’s national herd’s methane emissions may have been overestimated by as much as 18%.

Unfortunately, even if this were proven to be true across both dairy and beef farming, there is still the matter of a conservative 4 million tonnes of carbon to be cut from the sector’s total (of 23 million tonnes) by 2030.

The Climate Action Bill – which gave rise to sectoral emissions targets - made specific mention of Article 2 of the Paris Accord (signed by 190 nations) which warns against sacrificing food production in the pursuit of climate goals.

Many now believe however – and the narrative is already being established by our sector’s detractors - that Ireland’s targets can only be met by a reduction in the herd and by curtailing the production of dairy in Ireland.

**Raising our Voice, Letting People Know**

Irish dairy is exported to over 130 countries and contributes to a nutritious diet for 45 million people – and, as a result, delivers €5.2bn a year to the Irish economy. Add to that the fact that Irish dairy farming is the most GHG-emissions efficient in Europe and the implications are summed up by three Bs – Buoyant, Better and Best.

- Globally – inconvenient truth though it may be – demand for dairy products continues to be buoyant and shows no signs of dropping off.
- Ireland is better at producing dairy than most other countries.
- The best way of meeting demand for dairy, sustainably and with due regard for the environment, is by producing in a country that’s better at it.

Sadly, these facts - and the stories behind the industry's efforts to be more sustainable and to address the hard climate targets that have been set - aren't getting through. In the face of increasing misinformation, misperception and vocal opposition, it's no surprise that Irish dairy farmers feel underappreciated and misunderstood.

In 2022, we need a central, consolidated voice for Irish dairy, one that champions the industry not just in the wider agricultural sector and with legislators, but with the woman and man in the street – the consumer of dairy products – the person who, ultimately, gives us a social licence to produce.

NDC research shows that consumer trust in dairy farmers is waning – and 2022 should be the year we change that.

### **The Future of Farms and Jobs**

Dairy is working hard to achieve its climate targets – using technology to streamline its operations and pursuing innovations in farm practices. However, unless we work together to build support amongst the consumer, showcase the actions being taken and highlight the importance of the dairy industry to Ireland Inc, then herd reduction must be seen as inevitable.

Forcing a reduction in the national herd (which is currently the same size as it was in 1986) to achieve Irish targets threatens both efficient Irish food production methods and also the future of Ireland's 18,000 family farms and the 60,000 jobs supported by the industry.

It has been said – correctly - that farmers will be the first to be affected by climate change and there's no shying away from our collective responsibilities. Assuredly, the dairy sector will play its part alongside everyone else.

I can only imagine, however, how Irish dairy farmers will feel if their livelihoods and their futures are cut back by Irish legislation and yet they are still impacted by climate change driven by other countries filling the dairy void that our farmers have been forced to create.

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For further information:

Zoë Kavanagh, CEO, National Dairy Council | +353 1 290 2451 | [zkavanagh@ndc.ie](mailto:zkavanagh@ndc.ie)  
Jeremy Probert | 4TC | +353 (0) 89 700 0792 | [jeremy@4tc.ie](mailto:jeremy@4tc.ie)

### **About the NDC**

The National Dairy Council (NDC) champions the sustainability of quality Irish pasture-based dairy and its nutrition benefits in supporting healthier, more active living. The private, farmer-funded marketing agency has been working since 1964 to promote and protect Ireland's dairy reputation at home and abroad. It believes in a future in which sustainable Irish dairy is recognised and trusted as indispensable to Ireland's physical, social and economic wellbeing.