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ICOS Submission to the EU Public Consultation on the new Soil Strategy

ICOS is the umbrella body for over 130 co-operatives in Ireland – including the Irish dairy processing and milk purchasing co-operatives, livestock marts and other rural based enterprises – whose associated businesses have a combined turnover in the region of €14 billion, with some 150,000 individual members, employing 12,000 people in Ireland, and a further 24,000 people overseas.

ICOS welcomes this proposal for a new EU Soil Strategy and the opportunity it presents for further information exchange, sharing of best practices and promotion of sustainable soil management. We would highlight two main priorities for the Strategy:

- The need for a balanced approach on environment, social and economic considerations and therefore the need to facilitate enhanced environmental sustainability with on-farm productivity.
- Recognition of the variable soil characteristics and uses across the EU, which must be taken into account when defining soil quality standards and the measures to address soil threats and restoration. Providing for national or regional standards, targets and areas of action is in line with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles.

We wish to highlight that soil health and fertility have been an increasing focus for Irish farmers in recent years. This focus was particularly prompted by a 2018 review by Teagasc which indicated that while soil fertility levels on Irish farms were turning a corner, more improvement was needed, as only 18% of farms had achieved optimum levels of soil fertility.ⁱ Furthermore, five steps were identified to achieve and maintain optimum soil fertility levelsⁱⁱ:

- Regular soil samples taken for the whole farm;
- Lime application;
- Target optimum soil P and K fertility levels in all fields;
- Optimum use of slurry, applied early in the Spring period;
- Ensure a balanced nutrient supply.

Irish dairy co-operatives have been actively involved in implementing a range of programmes and initiatives to support farmers in the application of these steps:

- Individual co-op soil fertility programmes have been established which include soil sampling and analysis through the co-ops own analytical labs, providing a key service at affordable levels for farmers.
- The promotion of liming within co-op fertility programmes and through partnerships with lime suppliers and quarries. The use of lime and the control of soil pH is essential so as to optimise soil fertility and maximise the nutrient response to applied fertilisers. As a soil conditioner, lime promotes soil micro-organisms and encourages earthworm activity that breaks down plant and animal residues to release plant nutrients, especially nitrogen. Lime improves the availability of phosphorus and aids its release from organic matter. Overall, this makes lime is the cheapest and most effective fertilizer available to farmers.
- The ASSAP programmeⁱⁱⁱ, an innovative Government/industry collaborative initiative which has run since 2018, providing free agricultural sustainability advice from dedicated sustainability advisors to farmers on improved nutrient and land management practices, to reduce nutrient losses.

- A new Signpost Farm initiative^{iv} is to be launched in May this year. This is a multi-annual campaign to lead and support on-farm action to reduce the negative environmental impacts of agriculture, while creating more profitable farming enterprises.
- Joint programmes and advisory services with Teagasc, including a new structure of slurry management advice and the joining up of electronic advices/apps i.e. Nutrient Management Planning online and PastureBase, which are the main apps used by farmers for nutrient management planning and for managing grass growth – this will provide farmers with an integrated app which will incorporate sustainability management with best production management.

ICOS would therefore welcome a new EU Soil Strategy which will build on these positive developments, will continue to promote such action and initiatives undertaken by farmers, cooperatives and the agricultural industry as a whole and which will facilitate and foster the sharing of best practices based on innovation, existing national measures, voluntary actions and beneficial partnerships.

ⁱ Teagasc: <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/soil--soil-fertility/soil-analysis/>

ⁱⁱ Teagasc: <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/soil--soil-fertility/soil-analysis/5-practical-steps/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Teagasc: <https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2020/ASSAP-Factsheet.pdf>

^{iv} Teagasc: <https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2020/The-Signpost-Programme---web.pdf>