

Title	A Health Impact Assessment of the 2024 Climate Action Plan's Measure to Expand Ireland's Organic Sector: A Briefing
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Publication date	2025
Original Citation	O'Mullane, M., Kenny, T., Sulley, A., Brennan, M. M. and Sheehan, C. (2025) A Health Impact Assessment of the 2024 Climate Action Plan's Measure to Expand Ireland's Organic Sector: A Briefing. https://doi.org/10.33178/10468/18638
Type of publication	Report
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/10468/18638
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Download date	2026-08-30 02:26:25
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18638

**A Health Impact Assessment
of the 2024 Climate Action
Plan's Measure to Expand
Ireland's Organic Sector:
A Briefing**

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Year of Publication: 2025

Published: University College Cork (UCC): Cork

O'Mullane, M., Kenny, T., Sulley, A., Brennan, M. M. and Sheehan, C. (2025) A
Health Impact Assessment of the 2024 Climate Action Plan's Measure to Expand
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<https://doi.org/10.33178/10468/18638>

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A Health Impact Assessment of the 2024 Climate Action Plan's Measure to Expand Ireland's Organic Sector: A Briefing

Climate change presents significant health challenges. As part of a wider research project, **HIA-IM**, a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) was undertaken on the policy objective to expand Ireland's organic sector. This policy objective is detailed in the agricultural chapter of the 2024 Climate Action Plan. At the time that the HIA was being planned and undertaken, the 2024 Climate Action Plan was the most recent one published. The purpose of the HIA was to assess the potential positive, negative and unintended health impacts stemming from the policy objective on farmer's livelihoods. Following a review of the evidence, including interviews with 24 conventional and organic farmers across Ireland, the following 11 recommendations were developed by the HIA Steering Group.*

- Guarantee fair organic farmgate prices with coordinated government and industry support.
- Define, track and measure broader indicators of success beyond area of land farmed organically .
- Co-develop a research agenda with current and past organic farmers & address research gaps in organic production systems.
- Ensure diverse and transparent farmer participation in policy.
- Mainstream reporting of data on farmer health.
- Introduce measures targeting dairy farmers.
- Reduce administrative burden.
- Protect land in organic production.
- Promote and incentivize organic fruit, vegetables and legume growers.
- Reduce the minimum land requirement to participate in the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS).
- Scale-up organic education & advisory services.

* For details on the HIA Steering Group, please refer to page 16.

What is a Health Impact Assessment (HIA)?

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is an approach endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023) that enables diverse organisations and stakeholders to systematically examine the potential impacts of their policies, plans, programmes, or projects on people's health and wellbeing. HIA involves examining potential health impacts across population groups. It makes relevant links to potential changes in health outcomes and considering the impacts of these changes on health status inequality, whilst maintaining the focus on the effects that are likely significant on health (Pyper et al., 2021). The HIA guidance published by the All Island Institute of Public Health was used to navigate the HIA process (Pyper et al. 2021). For further information on HIA, please see the All-Island Institute of Public Health [webpage](#).

What was the focus of the Health Impact Assessment, and why?

Given the importance of the agriculture sector in reducing Ireland's greenhouse gases (GHG), which account for Ireland's largest share of the emissions profile (37.8%) (EPA, 2024), a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) was undertaken on the policy objective to expand Ireland's organic sector. This objective is detailed in the agricultural chapter of the 2024 Climate Action Plan (DECC, 2024). The HIA was conducted as part of the HIA-IM project. This policy objective is primarily actioned through the provision of 'financial support to farmers who convert to organic farming' (DECC, 2024: 295). It is expected that the policy objective will assist in reducing fertiliser and pesticide use (DECC, 2024) and contribute to improved ecosystem health and reducing GHGs. The fourth Climate Action Plan (2025) was published while undertaking this HIA, with a continuation of the action to support organic farming through financial support to farmers (DECC, 2025: 126).

Aligned with this climate-related rationale for transitioning to organic farming, there is also a societal-level rationale for transitioning to organic production for farmers. Social Justice Ireland (2020) highlight the need to support the move to more sustainable and climate-oriented agricultural practices for farmers. This move is one of the main tenets of the four **Just Transition** principles in the Climate Action Plan (2024), as outlined below. These principles underpin all statutory Climate Action Plans in Ireland are included in **Box 1**.

Box 1:

Just Transition Principles

Principle 1:

An integrated, structured and evidence-based approach to respond to just transition needs as they emerge.

Principle 2:

People are equipped with the right skills to be able to participate and benefit from the future net zero economy

Principle 3:

The costs are shared so that the impact is equitable, and existing inequalities are not exacerbated.

Principle 4:

Social dialogue to ensure impacted citizens and communities are empowered and are core to the transition process.

The purpose of the HIA was to (i) assess and report on the likely significant effects on the health of organic and conventional farmers in Ireland stemming from the objective to expand the organic sector, (ii) to make recommendations to negate adverse health impacts and enhance opportunities for health gain and (iii) to identify any health inequalities stemming from the policy objective and recommended how these inequalities can be mitigated and addressed.

Evidence appraised during the analysis stage of the HIA included:

- lived experience gathered through interviewing 24 farmers in Ireland.
- evidence from reviewing scientific literature and relevant reports.
- published studies reporting on the health of farmers and a farming profile.

What did we find? Impacts of the measure/ policy objective 'Expanding our Organic Sector' in the Climate Action Plan (2024)

The HIA identified the precarity and financial risk associated with transitioning to organic farming that may impact the health of farmers through livelihood impacts. While organic farming may offer less pressured and healthier livelihoods if adequate infrastructure and supports were in place, under current conditions, organic farming is considered a financially risky and unfeasible option for most conventional farmers, particularly dairy farmers.

The HIA determined that the farming population experience high vulnerability. Existing challenges specific to farming, such as high rates of musculoskeletal disorders and the physical and mental toll from long working hours, an increasing administrative burden and financial insecurity establish a vulnerable baseline. Without robust and integrated supports, converting to organic farming risks exacerbating these existing health stressors. Likely significant health impacts identified in the HIA include livelihood risks associated with converting to organics without adequate supports, which may add to the stress and financial insecurity experienced by some farmers. Comprehensive, long-term support encompassing market development, research, advisory services, and trust-building actions – such as clear government and industry support - are critical to ensure support of organic farming as a viable livelihood and achieve the Climate Action Plan's objectives.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The HIA concluded that implementing the policy objective ‘Expanding our Organic Sector’ in the Climate Action Plan (2024) may have significant potential positive health impacts, in enhancing sustainable livelihoods for farmers in Ireland if the adequate supports were in place. Livelihoods are a key determinant of health, and a secure income is a central component of livelihoods. Likely significant health impacts identified in the HIA include livelihood risks associated with converting to organics without adequate supports, which may add to the existing stress and financial insecurity experienced by some farmers. With the appropriate supports in place based on the needs of farmers, as set out in this report’s eleven recommendations (included below), organic farming presents a significant opportunity to preserve the environment, upon which farmer’s livelihoods and public health are dependent.

Eleven recommendations were formulated to address the identified gaps in infrastructure and supports for farmers, with a view to addressing the likely health impacts from the implementation of the policy objective. These recommendations seek to support the transition to organic farming as a viable option for farmers. **The Summary of the Rationale for Recommendations** from page 11 provides additional detail on these recommendations.

Importantly, this HIA has re-affirmed the difficult and stressful situation in which many Irish conventional and organic farmers are living and operating as food producers. Providing financial incentives alone are insufficient to protect the livelihoods of current organic farmers or to facilitate a wider transition to organic farming. Long-term support in the form of recommendations outlined in the HIA report are needed. These recommendations are listed below, aligned with the four Just Transition principles from the Climate Action Plan.

Recommendations	Alignment with Just Transition principles 1-4
1. Guarantee fair organic farmgate prices with coordinated government and industry support. ● Establish a premium farmgate price, reflecting the additional ecosystem services and environmental benefits they provide. ● Establish a premium farmgate price for organic food products, reflecting the additional ecosystem services and environmental benefits they provide. ● Differentiate payment systems from conventional farming favouring cattle weight and milk protein content which may penalize organic farmers and shifting to volume-based payment for organic liquid milk that also accounts for ecosystem services. ● Incorporate quality, health and biodiversity outcomes into pricing (i.e. soil health, antibiotic use reduction, and chemical nitrogen saved). ● Ensure organic farmers are not financially penalized in the wider move to earlier slaughter. ● Develop domestic markets for Irish organic products. ● Mandate organic quotas for beef and dairy processors. ● Mandate retailers to stock and promote Irish organic produce in store. ● Mandate organic food, produced/grown in Ireland, procurement quotas in public institutions (i.e. schools, hospitals). ● Increase marketing to raise awareness of Irish organic food, using the Irish rather than European certified organic logo and, focusing on its health, climate, and wider environmental benefits.	1, 2, 3
2. Define, track and measure broader indicators of success beyond area of land farmed organically ● Measuring the success of organic farming systems using indicators that capture indicators for improved air, water, climate and soil quality (i.e. antimicrobial and pesticide use reduction, nitrogen, GHGe, ammonia, and phosphorus savings, biodiversity gains). ● Developing indicators of all farmer health & wellbeing and social & economic resilience measures. ● Reporting on organic farming, by type of farm, and size in the national farm survey and the small farm survey.	1, 2, 3, 4
3. Co-develop a research agenda with current and past organic farmers & address research gaps in organic production systems ● Co-developing a research agenda with current and past organic farmers. ● Research exploring the accuracy of common perceptions (i.e. organic farming associations with lower yields, lower profits, lower food security, of no greater nutritional value, using more damaging chemicals, lower animal welfare, job losses in rural areas). ● Research exploring the interconnected environmental, human, animal, social and economic health case for organic versus conventional farming taking scale, farm type, physical/land/geographic characteristics, and full supply chains such into account. ● Research exploring the business case for organic farming, in relation to the impact of organic production on food quality, animal productivity, welfare and performance. ● Reporting on how much of the dairy farmer research levy is invested in organic research.	1, 2, 3, 4

Recommendations	Alignment with Just Transition principles 1-4
4. Ensure diverse and transparent farmer participation in policy ● Track and report farmer participant data by gender, farm type, and scale to ensure more diverse representation. ● Increase farmer participation and representation through targeted consultations, aligned with the wider Citizen Engagement actions across all Climate Action Plans.	1, 2, 3, 4
5. Mainstream reporting of data on farmer health ● Health status of farmers, disaggregated by farm type and scale, and across indicators of health inequalities, as a population cohort in the national census through the CSO. ● A national, annual survey of organic farmers in Ireland. ● Report on organic farming within future National Farm Surveys and Small Farm Surveys.	1, 2, 3
6. Introduce measures targeting dairy farmers ● Additional financial support for physical farm assets. ● Interviews with dairy farmers who have left organic farming in order to understand the challenges and develop solutions to the issues raised. ● Coupling payments with volumes of milk produced organically.	1, 2, 3
7. Reduce administrative burden ● Employing the services of the National Adult Literacy Association to screen all forms expected to be completed by the farming community. ● Working directly with farmers when reporting requirements are being developed. ● Streamlining reporting and data collection requirements. ● Improving data sharing between certification bodies and food and agricultural agencies. ● Providing additional administration support for farmers transitioning to organic. ● Ensuring that all reporting requirements are designed with consideration for the age profile of Irish farmers and varying levels of comfort with digital technologies.	2, 3
8. Protect land in organic production ● Explore the feasibility of introducing measures to protect land in organics i.e. introducing a stay on organic land where it cannot be farmed conventionally for a number of years.	1, 3

Recommendations	Alignment with Just Transition principles 1-4
9. Promote and incentivize organic fruit, vegetables and legume growers ● Increasing financial incentives and supports for organic fruit, vegetable, and legume growers. ● Creating and supporting alternative routes to market (i.e. public procurement, direct sales, community supported growers, farmers markets). ● Encouraging retailers to stock and promote organic fruit and vegetables and legumes grown in Ireland.	2, 3
10.Reduce the minimum land requirement to participate in the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS)	2, 3, 4
11. Scale-up organic education & advisory services ● Establishing an organic dairy farm along with a fruit, vegetable, legume farm operated by Teagasc to showcase best practices in organic animal and non-animal based farming systems. ● Ensuring that organic practices are included in the curriculum for second and third level agricultural courses. ● Incorporating organic farm visits into curriculum for second and third level students. ● Incorporating organic practices into existing training programs aimed at the general farming population (i.e. Green Cert) to support the normalization of organic farming and in presenting organic as a potential option for all farms. ● Ensuring farm advisors, consultants and veterinary professionals are included in development of advisory services as target groups. ● Monitoring and reporting on number of farmers, students and other professionals reached through education and advisory services.	2, 3

Summary of the Rationale for Recommendations

Economic disadvantage:

The evidence reported in the HIA highlights a significant competitive economic disadvantage experienced by organic farmers. Farmgate price and industry/public demand interventions are required to support and protect the economic status, and thus health status of current and future organic farmers. Fair farmgate prices for organic farmers and producers in conjunction with coordinated government and industry support are required to protect the livelihood of organic farmers and support the long-term livelihood viability of organic farming.

Dairy farmers:

In the past number of years, a small proportion of farmers have transitioned to organic farming, but not in the numbers or farm types that would be required to create a significant impact on GHGe reduction, biodiversity loss or water quality. Dairy cows form the majority of the national herd and of those who are farming organically, organic dairy farmers comprise less than 0.5 percent. Owing to the higher levels of debt carried by dairy farmers (Dillon et al, 2024), existing payment systems favouring the protein content of milk (Interview data as described in the main HIA Report) and dairying being the most economically viable farming system (Dillon et al. 2025), dairy farmers in particular, converting to organic is not a viable option for many dairy farmers. Organic dairy farms play a key role in reducing nitrate pollution, anti-microbial resistance, and methane emissions while also supporting the broader organic beef sector. The HIA identified that some organic dairy farmers may have financial difficulties in retrofitting existing physical farm assets to meet the spatial requirements to benefit from the organic farming scheme yet will still make valuable contributions to the national inventory by maintaining lower stocking rates, avoiding chemical nitrogen, and using organic feed. The low numbers of organic dairy farmers places the wider organic system at risk given the reliance of the organic beef sector on the dairy sector for replacement stock.

Small farms:

Small farms are more likely to use traditional, low-input methods and play a key role in environmental sustainability, rural economies, and cultural heritage (Dillon et al 2022). The minimum land requirement to participate in the Organic Farming Scheme for fruit and vegetable farmers is one hectare. Other farm types, supporting local food systems but under three hectares, are excluded from participating.

Access to land:

The cost of land also poses a significant barrier to sustaining the livelihoods of organic farmers, particularly for those reliant on leased land. In line with global trends, land prices in Ireland are projected to rise further (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2024). There are growing concerns about a potential 'land squeeze'—a situation where increasing competition for land drives up prices, making it difficult for new entrants to access land and for existing farms to expand (Dalton, 2025). The HIA identifies organic farmers as particularly vulnerable in this context. Reducing the minimum land requirement to participate in the organic farming scheme, protecting land farmed organically, and measures targeting dairy farmers are needed to mitigate against these vulnerabilities. The latter would also help in building trust within the wider farming community that the objective to expand organic farming is targeting the more emission and nitrate intensive farming systems and in achieving the objectives of the Climate Action (i.e. reduce GHGe, protect water quality and biodiversity) and thus protecting wider population health.

Lack of research and data:

The HIA also identified the lack of research and data on organic systems in Ireland (Markiewicz-Keszycka et al. 2023; Martin et al. 2024, interviews) as a pathway that increases the vulnerability of organic farming as a viable livelihood. This makes quantifying and measuring the impacts of organic farming along with communicating and tracking the potential benefits difficult. Criticism of the goal to extend the area of land that is farmed organically include inadequate and insufficient quantifiable goals and concrete ways to measure progress along with lack of strategic vision beyond 2030 (ECA, 2024). These shortfalls also prevent the establishment of a fair farmgate price for organic food, and ultimately the marketing of, and demand for, organic food produced in Ireland. This creates an insecurity around the future of organic farming in Ireland. The lack of data and research may also contribute to maintaining narratives and perceptions of organic farming that may be inaccurate (Figure 4, page 47, HIA Report). Defining and tracking broader indicators of success along with addressing research gaps is necessary to support the livelihood of current and future organic farmers and the goals of the Climate Action Plan.

Farmer led research:

Organic farmers are best placed to identify the research needs affecting farmgate prices and demand, thus developing a research agenda with current and past organic farmers will be essential. Past organic farmers may offer particularly valuable insights into challenges that resulted in them leaving organic farming. Measures to ensure the process of development is transparent and includes a broad range of farmers is important. This may be achieved by moving beyond organisational representation and reporting participation of the farmers involved by gender, farm type and scale. This may also work to build trust in the institutions responsible for agriculture.

Advisory and educational services:

Despite notable improvement in the organic advisory services provided by Teagasc's organic team, in comparison to conventional farming, knowledge and advisory services available to organic farmers is lacking. This lack in investment in the sector contributes to the insecurity of the sector and thus impacts the livelihoods of organic farmers. It also sends a poor signal to conventional farmers concerning governmental commitment to expanding organic farming and ensuring that the sector is appropriately serviced. Accordingly further investment in organic education, and advisory services and targeted curriculum development are necessary to increase exposure to organic practices, protect the livelihoods of organic farmers, and to build trust in organic farming as a viable farming system.

Administration burden:

All farmers are under increasing pressure and stress from an expanding administration workload. Complex and time-consuming paperwork may also deter farmers from converting to organic systems. Efforts to reduce the administrative burden on organic farmers may mitigate against potential adverse health impacts such as stress.

Organic growers:

Lastly, the Irish organic sector is currently based on organic animal production and focused on the export markets (Bord Bia, 2023). Demand for organic fruit and vegetables is expected to grow (EC, 2024). Despite data gaps on domestic organic crop production in Ireland (DAFM, 2024), research indicates that 22 percent of Ireland's imported fruits and vegetables—many of which could be grown locally, such as onions, garlic, apples, and leeks—originate from countries classified as climate vulnerable (Stanley et al., 2023). Supporting organic growers along with developing local organic markets is essential to building more resilient local food systems, improving human health, reducing reliance on imports, reducing methane emissions, preventing the growth of anti-microbial resistance, and adapting to global food supply risks. Considering the very low numbers of organic fruit and vegetables farmers within the organic farming system, and the continual decline of growers in Ireland over the past decade further financial incentives and support for organic fruit, vegetable and legume growers are needed to encourage more growers into the market. Importantly, creating and supporting market access and alternative models of distribution that protect farmgate prices, such as public procurement, community supported agriculture (CSA), farmers markets and online platforms should be explored.

Members of the HIA Steering Group and the Final HIA Report

The HIA team comprised twelve individuals in a Steering Group established for directing and undertaking the assessment. All members contributed to the final report. Members are listed below with their affiliations.

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Acknowledgement in creating this Briefing

In preparing this briefing based on the HIA report, we acknowledge adapting a framework for HIA briefing summaries as developed by Public Health Scotland (PHS, 2022, 2024). The HIA was undertaken as part of the HIA-IM project, which is funded by the Health Research Board (grant number: EIA-2022-001).

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