

Irish Grassland Association 1946-2006 - Delivering the Benefits from Grassland

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Introduction

The Irish Grassland Association (IGA) is Ireland's leading forum for discussing the science of grass and animal production, and the economics and finances of dairy, beef cattle and sheep production systems. Membership is 800 and is a lively mix of progressive farmers (70%), research scientists, advisers and agribusiness personnel. The IGA is a member of the European Grassland Federation and has close working relationships with the Ulster Grassland Society, Fermanagh Grassland Club and the British Grassland Society.

This paper contains a summary of the Association's objectives, its activities and technology interactions over the decades, and includes the developments described previously by O'Keeffe (1996). It will be shown that: (a) Research and Development have always been core components of IGA meetings and, (b) the IGA has been a significant driving force in the use of knowledge by dairy, beef cattle and sheep producers for exploiting grazed grass as the cheapest form of feed for ruminant production. In particular, the IGA draws heavily on the skills and knowledge of scientists at the Teagasc research centres, ARINI at Hillsborough, and the Plant Testing Station at Crossnacreevy.

The formative years

Following six years of impoverished farming during World War 2, lack of inputs and knowledge were identified as major constraints limiting successful grassland farming. Basic information on soil fertiliser requirements, grass varieties, reseeding and animal nutrition was non-existent. The New Zealand consultant, George Holmes, brought in by the Minister for Agriculture James Dillon, concluded that Irish grassland in the post-war years was producing significantly less than its potential. However, some pioneering farmers were gathering information to show that Irish grassland was capable of producing significantly more than the limited 5 to 6 months grazing that was customary at the time.

It was against this background that a group of enthusiasts held two meetings in Dublin in 1946; in 84 Merrion Square, Dublin on May 29 and at the Horse Show on July 7, and formed the Irish Grassland Association. The group included progressive farmers, The O'Morchoe, R. McCulloch (Ballyboughal, Dublin), W. Bland (Laois), H.M. Fitzpatrick, - Leonard, J. Litton, W. Bryan and Capt. Redmond together with Professors P.J. Caffrey, M. Gorman, E.J. Sheehy (University College Dublin), and Harry Spain (Department of Agriculture).

Objectives were clearly set:

- To identify all available information on grass farming and to help in its application in farm practice.
- To advance and spread the knowledge of grassland and animal production methods which can increase farm profits.
- To provide opportunities for farmers, research workers and advisers to discuss worthwhile developments in research and farm practice.
- To publish original articles or literature on progressive ideas for the advancement of the agricultural industry.

The founders quickly established a pattern of strong relationships and interactions between farmers and research workers. It was accepted at the outset that both were inter-dependant and that each thrived on the others' ability to mutual advantage. This pattern of inter-dependence has been a feature of the Association's progress over the decades and continues to flourish today.

In the early years the Association was dependent on research information from outside the jurisdiction. Useful relationships were established with Aberystwyth (Wales), the Grassland Research Institute (UK), and with pioneering work already underway in Northern Ireland, notably by John Lowe. The IGA invited leading researchers from these sources to its meetings. Progress was made by identifying areas of weakness and arranging visits to the limited research facilities and progressive farms. Existing information was of a very fundamental nature. Factors affecting soil fertility were scarcely understood and represented the greatest limitation to grass growth. Lime was applied infrequently, and clinical phosphate deficiency in cattle existed.

Johnstown Castle

Matters improved in the early 1950s after the Department of Agriculture acquired Johnstown Castle in Co. Wexford. A research programme was established with objectives centred on defining optimum levels of lime and fertilisers for Irish grassland. Production targets for Irish grassland based on measurement were identified for the first time. However, today's view of grassland being fully integrated in a farming system scarcely existed. In those early years of the Association there was a tendency to regard good green grass as an end in itself. However, this attitude did not prevail for long.

Evolution of policy and interests

The President in 1952 (Edward Richards Orpen), instigated change by developing a new policy, - that better farming must be measured by the trend in net profit on a whole-farm basis. Yields per acre or per animal were of little interest unless accompanied by improved net profits. In the evolution of this policy IGA interests became centred on the inter-relationships of animal and pasture on livestock performance.

Responding to the change in emphasis, the Council invited authoritative speakers from overseas institutions to discuss specialised livestock topics - especially dairying. Chief amongst these were Mac Cooper (then at Wye College and later at Newcastle University) who became very much part of the IGA platform; McMeekan from New Zealand discussed low cost performance and whole-farm output without expensive frills, and Alan Stewart from the Milk Marketing Board in England. Stewart told the IGA members that looking at yields of cows was not good enough and that if progress in A.I. breeding was to be achieved, careful assessments and selection of bulls from performance measurements on their daughters were required. Although the IGA had significant impact during the 1950s in providing knowledge and encouragement, it had no impact on animal breeding.

Uncertainties surrounding the conservation of winter-feed presented another bottleneck that bedevilled successful farming. Hay making in Irish weather was always unpredictable. Insufficient winter feed resulted in animal stress in a bad year and produced emaciated cows on dairy farms. At an IGA meeting Henry Kennedy described the condition as 'scientific starvation'. The IGA saw the need for more and better silage and organised visits to the early silage making farms of Rob McCulloch, Sean O'Neill (Lurgan) and elsewhere. Uptake was hampered by confusion on additives and conservation techniques. This situation was soon to change, not alone in silage making but across all sectors of grass farming.

An Foras Taluntais

Following the establishment of An Foras Taluntais (AFT) in 1958 (for which the IGA was a nominating body), its research programme under Director Tom Walsh gave a new impetus to Irish agriculture that continued into the following decades. The pursuit of knowledge and pushing forward the horizons on all sectors of grass farming and ruminant production was a central feature of the AFT programme. For the first time, grass-based livestock production systems were developed based on sound scientific principles and the application of measures of efficiency under Irish climatic conditions.

One of the most significant research outcomes related to maximising the level of N fertiliser use for Irish grassland, and to increasing stocking rates sufficient to consume all grass grown. Research conducted at Moorepark, Grange and Creagh identified the commercial levels of N fertiliser for the appropriate stocking rate in dairy, beef and sheep enterprises. Timing and rates of N applications for grass growth were established at Johnstown Castle, including urea and the role of sulphur. The forage harvester replaced the buckrake. Studies on silage conservation at Grange clarified the factors affecting digestibility, preservation and animal performance, resulting in a consistent and reliable winter-feed.

The development of creamery milk production, beef cattle and sheep output was now underpinned by research and measurement back-up.

EU Entry 1973

In a keynote paper presented at the 1971 Winter Meeting in Cahir, Past-President Michael Walshe described how the current output of Irish agriculture could be trebled, and he quantified the inputs required, including labour, credit and finance. As ever, the IGA platform provoked some straight talking. Weaknesses in Irish agriculture and lack of Government commitment to the development of the very industry that hoped to benefit most from EU entry in 1973 were exposed.

It is of interest to recall 35 years on, that land structure and the exodus from the land were talking points in general circulation then as now. This was evident in the discussion following the address by Dr. Sicco Mansholt, President of the EU Commission at the 25th Anniversary Conference held in Dublin in 1971. The debate was neatly summed up by Past-President Joe Bruton: "We have Michael Walshe telling us about the potential of our grassland, Dr. McMeekan (then with the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Washington DC) telling us where the money could come from and now Dr. Mansholt telling us of the product market potential. I don't know what more we want offered to us by way of encouragement, but what we do want is national courage in this country".

Down on the farm, there was an accelerated uptake of AFT information for maximising the opportunities created by EU entry. Capital investment in farm modernisation was huge, rotary parlours were installed for the efficiency of labour, slatted sheds erected and beef cattle feedlots established. Land prices soared, credit was readily available and costs were not a main concern in the context of unlimited markets and high prices. The thirst for R&D information and innovative ideas was clearly evident when over 400 Grassland enthusiasts turned up for the 1973 Summer Tour to Grange/Meath/Louth organised jointly with the Ulster Grassland Society. Sheep production did not develop as an important money making enterprise for another decade due to restrictions in the French market and associated economic factors.

Blueprint for milk production

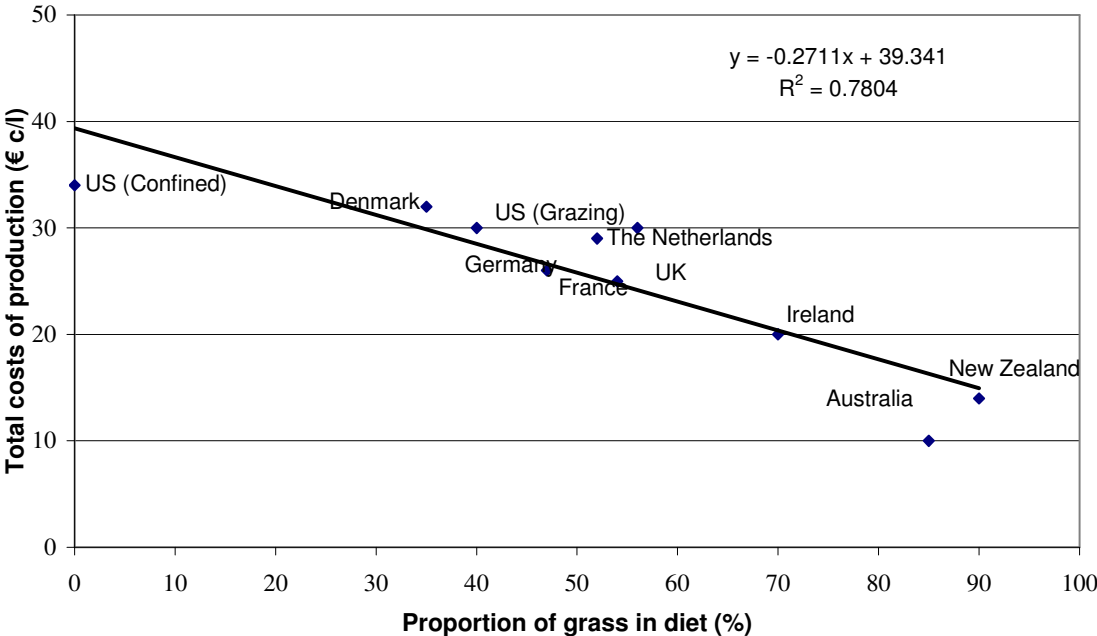
The following decade was characterised by massive technological change with grassland management improving to the extent that good farmers required only a third of a hectare of land to carry one cow per year. Research at Moorepark developed the following blueprint for milk production: 5150 kg milk output/cow, stocking rate 0.34 ha/cow (1100 gal on 0.85 acres/cow), 1.3 t silage DM/cow, 3.5 t grazed grass/cow, 400 kg N/cow and 650 kg concentrates/cow (P. Dillon *pers. comm.*).

Achieving high dry matter intake

Following the introduction of milk quotas, maximising output from grazed grass became a priority due to the shift in emphasis to maximising profit per gallon with

quota being the limiting factor. Constraints to DM intake at pasture, e.g. quality, pre- and post-grazing height and grass allowance became crucial. Research at Moorepark over the last 10 years has developed grazing strategies for increasing the proportion of grazed grass in the cow's diet to 75%, reducing grass silage to less than 20% and concentrate input to 5%. These changes in the feed budget have potential to reduce feed costs by 0.8 cent/litre. Measurement of farm grass cover is a key requirement for implementing these guidelines and the relevant grass cover targets for spring-calving systems have been established. The significance of high DM intake is vividly illustrated in Figure 1. (Dillon *et al.*, 2005).

Figure 1. Relationship between total costs of production and proportion of grazed pasture in cows ration (Dillon *et al.*, 2005)



For the future, due to increased emphasis on product quality and issues associated with nitrogen leaching, soil compaction, gas emissions and animal welfare, higher productivity per animal will be required. Daily grass intake will be maximised by adhering to important sward characteristics such as maintaining a high proportion of green leaf within the grazing horizon while allocating an adequate daily herbage allowance. Increasing the green leaf proportion at the base of the sward may play an important role in increasing herbage intake and making grazing management easier.

Progress in grass breeding has been less than might be expected. Current grass selection and evaluation systems target improved grass DM yields under cutting systems of management rather than animal performance. Although grass breeders have improved DM yields by 0.5% per annum between 1965 and 1990, there is a

requirement for an increased grass selection programme focussed on characteristics that influence animal performance, i.e. herbage intake.

Grass breeding in the future will be assisted greatly by new technologies involving gene manipulation, the identification of quantitative loci (QTL) and the use of *in situ* hybridisation to differentially label chromosomes. Careful choice of QTL in market-assisted selection should minimise undesirable correlated responses to selection such as tendency for early spring growth to be associated with early heading and stem development. Use of techniques to genetically modify plants will facilitate the development of plants with elevated concentration of ruminal undegradable dietary protein and high-energy yielding compounds such as starch or triacylglycerides. These are some of the possibilities for future production systems

Grass-based beef systems

Beef cattle enterprises are relatively inefficient when compared with dairying due to lower conversion rates of feed into output and income. At Teagasc Grange, Eddie O’Riordan, Pdraig O’Kiely and colleagues tackled the priorities for more efficient measures in beef cattle production, feed cost and in animal breeding. During the period 1980 to 1995 the targets set for suckler calf to beef were advanced progressively from a carcass weight of 340 to 395kg for steers, and from a carcass output/ha of 410 to 500kg/year. Progress was accelerated by innovative farmers who joined the IGA platform and reported on their experiences in commercial practice, including weaknesses, likely solutions and ideas that created valuable feedback to researchers.

Critical reappraisal of the cattle diet generated a new focus on grassland management strategies. The national balance sheet for the proportions of grazed grass, conserved grass and concentrates, expressed as DM intake was: grazed grass 57%, conserved grass 29%, concentrates 14% (McLoughlin, 1991). Costs attributable to the conserved grass plus concentrate components amounted to 70% of total feed costs. It was evident that the economic viability of cattle enterprises is dependent on developing the competitive advantages of grazed grass. As a priority, more flexible grazing procedures were developed to allow for the ever-present fluctuations in grass growth while at the same time utilising the sward in favour of higher animal intake. Measurement of grass supply week-to-week has been adopted as a key requirement for utilising grass to best advantage on the cattle farm. Details on the use of sward height measurements for estimating grass supply and the associated benefits for production efficiency were described in detail at the 50th Anniversary Beef Conference in 1996 (O’Riordan and O’Kiely, 1996), and at the ‘Grass Ireland 2000’ meeting in Navan (O’Riordan, *et al.*, 2000).

The current targets for suckler beef systems are:-

Standard - 510kg carcass output/ha @stocking rate 0.8 ha/cow beef unit and 200kg N/ha.

REPS - 410kg carcass output/ha @stocking rate 1.0 ha/cow beef unit and 100kg N/ha (Drennan *et al.*, 2004)

Other advances in grassland science include the use of white clover-based swards for achieving high output of beef and palatability evaluations of perennial ryegrass cultivars. Strategic management in spring and autumn has increased the grazing season by 4-5 weeks. High performance from maize and whole-crop cereal silages has been quantified and the appropriate technologies identified. Technologies now being developed to deliver the benefits from grassland include: optimising intake of grazed grass/legume mix over an extended grazing season; quantifying the nutritive value of ryegrasses on the DAF recommended list; improved legume breeding to produce high DM yield and enhanced N fixing abilities.

Outdoor pads for wintering cattle were designed and evaluated successfully to offer a capability for lifting cattle enterprise competitiveness. Their adoption in practice around the country represents present day technology uptake.

Challenges to the sheep sector

In the 1970s the national ewe flock plummeted to less than two million ewes. This was due to limited market access and inferior financial returns compared with dairying or beef. Sheep farming remained in the doldrums until the 1980s when the Common Policy for sheep was implemented. The Sheep CAP heralded a new era, and unprecedented expansion in sheep numbers followed. Profits were second only to dairying.

The delivery of AFT R&D information facilitated growth in output and wealth creation for the sheep sector. AFT Council member and IGA Past-President John Orpen was a prime mover in pushing research on specialised sheep systems as a matter of policy. It was the development of silage-based in-wintering systems that offered farmers a new strategy for rationalising their grass resources with significant knock-on effects: resting of pastures, fertiliser N applications for higher stocking rates and adoption of paddock grazing, resulted in a big lift to the carrying capacity of Irish pasture, up to 15 ewes per ha. Whole-farm grazing systems were set up at Blindwell and Knockbeg to illustrate the principles, i.e. productive pastures well stocked with prolific ewes (litter size 1.9) producing an output of over 400kg of carcass lamb per ha.

However, serious gaps in know-how prevailed, e.g. skills in day-to-day management of large flocks, lamb survival and disease control. IGA initiatives included the annual Sheep Conference first held in 1983. Outside speakers were brought in, notably Bill Fell from Yorkshire, Karl Linklater, VIC, St.Boswells and John Read, a UK Shepherd of the Year. Farm Study Tours to Britain were undertaken with the help of MLC: 1980 Midlands/Lincoln, 1984 Hereford/Chilbolton, 1985 Somerset/Devon, 1986 Cumbria, 1987 Mid-Wales. Uptake of know-how was extensive; the number of flock owners expanded to almost 50,000 and ewe numbers to 5 million.

Changes in CAP in the 90s altered the income relativities of livestock enterprises putting sheep at a disadvantage. The lamb price/feed cost ratio disimproved, decline was triggered and there was a huge cull of nearly 400,000 ewes in 1999 alone.

These factors stimulated a new focus on the role of grazed grass for achieving: (a) bottom line production costs and, (b) labour-saving practices. Research at Knockbeg showed that by using grass budgeting principles at stocking rates similar to REPS, extended grazing as a substitute for silage and housing can cut costs per ewe by over 20%. Man hours per day were reduced by two-thirds. Extended grazing is now being practised on a number of commercial farms. Winter housing will continue to be a central component of the intensively stocked system. In tackling the labour issue, a good example of how top farmers have stimulated new ideas was seen at the IGA visit to George Stanley's 800 ewe flock in Laois in 2003. The use of equipment modified for speeding up feeding and day-to-day housing jobs marked new advances in short-circuiting competing demands for time and labour.

Following the 2004 CAP Reforms and decoupling, the IGA linked up with Alistair Carson and his colleagues in Northern Ireland to decide on appropriate response. Jointly with DARDNI, ARINI, UGS and BGS, the IGA organised a 2-day Conference at Greenmount in May 2005 on the theme 'Profit From Your Labour'. Keynote speakers and facilitators including top sheep breeders Lesley Stubbings (Northants), Murray Rohloff (NZ) Alistair Carson, Seamus Hanrahan and John Shirley, outlined their vision for the sustainable development of Ireland's sheep industry. Over 100 IGA delegates participated and departed with positive messages on measures of efficiency for cutting costs and maximising labour returns. One of Rohloff's recommendations has been acted on, i.e. the establishment of the Sheep Strategy Group. Chairman John Malone presented his first report at the IGA 2006 Sheep Conference, pointing out that: (a) Irish processors have capacity to process a higher output into a market that is only 80% self-sufficient and, (b) one-third of producers do not cover the costs of production. Of the various measures outlined there was little mention of our greatest resource, i.e. grass.

The future? The only sheep R&D station in the east of Ireland has been closed. In its place Teagasc is undertaking technology transfer initiatives onto commercial farms, moves that hold promise. The evidence for maximising grazed grass in the diet of the ewe is significant, yet expensive creep feeding continues. Why? The gains in profit from finishing lambs on grass alone were evident at the IGA visit to Andrew Moloney's farm in Edenderry in 2006. What effort is being made to develop and foster skills for estimating how much grass DM is on the sheep farm week-to-week? Can we develop 'easy care' sheep with disease resistant traits? Research at Athenry has identified breed differences for resistance to worm parasites. The use of molecular genetics in breeding for resistance to footrot offers possibilities (Conington *et al.*, 2006). Can a footrot-DNA test appropriate for our breeds be developed? More immediately, the Sheep Strategy Group will be expected to activate measures for increasing the earning power of the 35,000 producers who remain dependent on sheep for income.

Submissions on agricultural policy

Responding to changes in current agricultural policy as they take shape, the IGA has engaged in discussion with the policy makers of the day in government and

submitted its proposals in the interests of a vibrant and sustainable Irish agriculture. Submissions included:

In 1987, 1999 and 2003; cutbacks in Teagasc Research

In 1999; Agric-Food 2010 Committee

In 2001, 2004 and 2006; Nitrates Directive

In 2001, then President Noel Culleton forewarned the IGA on the damaging effects to Irish agriculture of the Nitrates Directive.

In 2003; Milk Quotas

Strategic reviews

With on-going changes in EU policies and in the national economy, the IGA has conducted periodic reviews of its aims and vision, its organisation, and responses to new opportunities, led by the President of the day, notably Padraig O'Kiely, Matt Dempsey, Pat McFeely, Con Hurley and John O'Brien. Issues subjected to scrutiny include:

- How best to address the needs of the membership as changes occur in the national economy.
- Review of the IGA platform as a debating forum especially with policy makers.
- Planning for future initiatives to provide leadership to the industry.
- Improving the presentation and delivery of the papers presented at its conferences.
- Increasing the membership including corporate membership.

Fundamental questions

In keeping with its role for vigorous dialogue, some stark messages have been delivered from the IGA platform in recent years. In particular, at the 2000 September meeting, Michael Murphy argued that the agricultural industry had no clear vision for the future. He was strongly critical of the performance of the institutions and farm service agencies surrounding Irish agriculture, the rigidity of the milk quota regulations and lack of innovation in milk processing and marketing. His message was that "nine out of ten farmers will either be out of business or living in poverty within 10 years" and asked "Where are the people to plan and implement constructive change"? He urged all segments of the industry to come together and agree a vision to secure the future, develop a vibrant industry, provide opportunity for new entrants and prosperity and a future for Irish farmers. "I wish in 10 years time to be part of a positive, dynamic, growing industry, which is highly competitive internationally and giving good incomes and careers to people at all levels of the industry".

The debate continues with significant contributions from Mike Magan on priorities for turning around the steady erosion of profit margin on-farm.

International Grassland Congress

The world's grazing lands consist of 3,000 million ha of grassland, most of which is utilised by livestock for feeding the world's populations. The IGC is the premier world event for grassland R&D, a forum for authoritative analyses on world food production and on new technologies for utilising grasslands for the benefit of mankind. It is held every four years.

With the build up of R&D information in Ireland and associated grassland impetus in the 70s, the Council recognised the potential benefits of bringing the Congress to Ireland. At the XII Congress in Moscow in 1973, the IGA submitted a bid that had world-wide support, but in the event lost out to Leipzig in East Germany for 1977. The IGA then took the opportunity to activate a follow-on event to the Leipzig Congress, namely, an International Meeting on the theme 'Animal Production from Temperate Grassland'. President Jim O'Grady in association with Aidan Conway and AFT headed up the organisation of this event held in the RDS, Dublin, June 5-12, 1977. Twenty-one leading researchers were selected to present plenary papers focussed on temperate grass growing conditions, with 53 offered papers and study tours. 365 delegates from all temperate zones including those in South America participated.

In 1997 at the XVIII IGC in Canada, BGS and IGA delegates Roger Wilkins and the author agreed to explore the feasibility of making a joint UK/Irish bid to host the XX IGC in 2005. The bid, compiled by Dr John Walsh for IGA with the theme 'Grassland – A Global Resource', was successful. The management of the Congress was delegated to a special Organising Committee anchored by Dr Frank O'Mara (UCD) and included representatives from IGA, BGS, Teagasc, DAFF, DARDNI and UCD. The core programme as held in UCD Belfield on June 26 – July 1 2005 including the Jan Crichton Producer Forum that featured a paper by IGA Past President Jim Dwyer. Satellite Workshops were held as an integral part of the Congress at Aberystwyth, Belfast, Cork, Glasgow and Oxford. The Congress attracted over 1100 delegates worldwide including 95 from Ireland.

European Grassland Federation

The EGF facilitates close contacts between European Grassland Organisations by initiating symposia, etc. and promoting interchange of scientific ideas and results. Currently, Eddie O'Riordan at Grange is IGA representative. A 4-day general scientific meeting is held every two years. Following an invitation by Aidan Conway, then President of EGF, the IGA hosted the 12th General Meeting of the European Grassland Federation in UCD Belfield on July 4-7 1988. Ten Plenary papers together with 76 Offered papers were presented. 223 delegates from 22 European countries including 46 from Ireland participated.

British Grassland Society

The Summer Meeting of the BGS is regarded by many as its main event. It consists of three full days of farm study visits and AGM. The Meeting has been hosted by the IGA on two occasions, in 1964 in Meath/Kildare/Cork and in 1992 in Cork, led by Eamonn White and Con Hurley as Host Vice-Presidents, respectively. The theme in 1992 was 'The Cork Grass Mixture: Research + Practice + Profit. Study visits to Moorepark and to grass farm enterprises specially selected for innovative and profitable systems were arranged. 199 BGS members participated.

Joint meetings – Grass Ireland 2000

To mark the new millennium, the IGA in association with the UGS, Fermanagh Grassland Club and South Armagh Grassland Club organised two Meetings in Tullamore and Navan to gather and update the membership on: (1) the latest R&D grass-related information north and south; (2) EU Policy and, (3) producing cattle for Europe. Franz Fischler, EU Commissioner for Agriculture, was the keynote speaker in Tullamore.

Administration

Working at the heart of the Association, the administrative, secretarial and financial expertise of Madeleine Flanagan and Grainne Dwyer have been essential components for the IGA's progress. This review would not be complete without expressing due recognition and tributes. Quite apart from the smooth running of the substantial calendar of events, dealing with day-to-day queries and promoting IGA interests, the financial health of the Association has been largely due to their stewardship.

Donegal Organising Committee

In an area noted for its progressive farming, a number of grassland enthusiasts in east Donegal led by Neville Chance asked for approval from the IGA Council in the 60s to form a sub-committee for the purpose of arranging Grassland meetings locally. Distance plus the difficulties of getting away for two days or so to participate at meetings in the south were cited as reasons. The Council agreed and also that all participants be fully paid-up members. The committee with Neville Chance in particular was very active and successful. Two meetings were held annually in Raphoe and there was a close affinity with Northern Ireland interests. The committee hosted the IGA Summer Meeting on a number of occasions, notably in Derry and east Donegal in 1970, against the backdrop of the Troubles. Members got a front-seat view of the problems when the bus driver took a wrong turn in Derry city. Neville passed away in 1994 and committee interest was overtaken by newly formed discussion groups and agri-business meetings.

Association Journal

The IGA's Journal was launched during the 60s principally through the efforts of Vivian Vial, senior AFT researcher and IGA Council member, who recognised more than most the importance of publishing the papers that contributed to the development of IGA thinking. He saw the annual proceedings as a medium for the dissemination of authoritative and enlightened ideas. He was succeeded from 1973 to 2000 by the author who collated and edited all suitable papers. David McGilloway has taken over the editorial work since 2000. Requests from overseas libraries indicate awareness of research developments and progressive farming in Ireland and recognition of the role of the IGA in reporting this progress. It also provides a permanent record of useful reference material for farmers and students.

Agricultural Research Forum

In 1970, to provide opportunities for scientists to read short technical papers and to exchange ideas, the IGA initiated a one-day seminar held twice annually in Dublin. It was organised by Sean Crowley initially, followed by Jim O'Grady and later by Padraig O'Kiely. It was expanded to two days in 1994 and jointly with the Irish Tillage and Land Use Society, Soil Science Society and the Agricultural Economics Society, it operates under the umbrella 'Agricultural Research Forum'. The number of papers including posters has grown to 135 in 2006 presented in three simultaneous sessions. Micheal Diskin has chaired the Organising Committee since 2001. Ann Gilsenan at Grange provides the highly valued administrative back-up. Held in Tullamore, the Forum has become a core event in the researcher's annual calendar.

Summary

- The IGA has provided an independent forum for discussing new information, technologies, farm practices and policies and for stimulating new ideas.
- Members are provided with opportunities to discuss the latest cutting edge information and ideas that can increase farm profits.
- Grass will continue to be Ireland's main competitive advantage for ruminant production.

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