

**Speech at opening of
International Farm Management Association
Conference
by Éamon Ó Cuív T.D.,
Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.
16 July 2007**

Read on his behalf by Michael Corcarig

I would like, first of all this morning, to welcome you all here today or as we say in Irish, “cuirim céad míle fáilte romhaibh” (A hundred thousand welcomes here today).

I would, first of all, here this morning, like to introduce myself. As you have been told, I am the Minister of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs of the Government of Ireland. I am, to my knowledge, the only Minister of Rural Development in the European Union that is not also a Minister of Agriculture and this shows that the Irish Government

1. believe that both rural development and agriculture and fisheries are so significant that two separate Cabinet Ministers should have responsibilities for these important issues; and
2. that rural development, though complimentary, is a separate issue from the industry of agriculture.

Ireland has traditionally been a rural country with an economy heavily dependent on the agricultural sector for its employment and income. We have seen significant changes in the shape of

the rural economy since the 1970s. An acceleration from the CAP reforms of the 1990s has resulted in a major reduction in the numbers of farmers and this has, of course, led to significant changes in rural areas not just in Ireland but throughout all Member States of the European Union.

A number of changes have occurred this decade which have led to a greater focus on rural development issues and priorities. All Government Programmes and schemes must now be rural-proofed and considered in the context of ensuring full availability to rural dwellers. In 2002 the Taoiseach recognised the changes emerging in rural life and decided to establish a Ministry responsible for rural development policy separate from the Ministry responsible for agricultural policy, a Ministry I have been honoured to hold since then. The aim of my Department in relation to rural development is to implement a strategy for rural development on the basis of an inclusive approach to sustainable development, the integration of policies, a regional dimension and partnership with the rural community.

When it comes to cities, Government traditionally have been willing to make the big investments but I have often criticised the fact that in the past people believed that schemes with small levels of funding could provide the impetus for rural development. Programmes such as the LEADER programme, worthy and all as they were, were not and are not sufficient in themselves to reverse the trend of rural decline. To achieve our objective, every Government policy would have to be framed in such a way as to ensure that rural areas have an equal chance of prosperity with

urban areas. The main elements of any broad rural development approach has to include the following:

1. The provision of physical and social infrastructure of an equal standard in rural areas relative to the population, as is available in urban areas.
2. Ensuring that the cost of basic services such as communications, energy etc. are equal throughout the territory of the state.
3. Physical planning laws that allow for both the provision in rural areas of dwelling houses and also of industrial, commercial and office buildings as well as social infrastructure in small villages and in the countryside.
4. Ensuring, as far as practicable, that all regions, including rural areas, have as equal a proportion of state created service employment, including central Government Department employment, as possible.
5. The development of enterprise policies that are specially geared towards rural areas and that build on their particular strengths particularly in resource based industries such as agriculture, quarrying, fish processing, forestry etc.
6. The provision of a comprehensive education, health, social and recreation services throughout rural areas.

The achievement of these aims is a difficult task when one looks at the complexities and diversity of rural Ireland. My Department delivers rural development programmes such as LEADER, with which you are all familiar with, which has been in operation since

the early 1990s and also has introduced the CLÁR Programme which provides additional supports to areas which have lost population over the years.

Through the CLÁR programme, my Department continues to address depopulation, as well as the decline and lack of services in rural areas. The Programme funds or co-funds, together with other Departments, State agencies and local authorities, investment in selected priority developments, these investments support physical, economic and social infrastructure across a wide range of measures and reflect the priorities identified by the communities. The areas originally selected for inclusion in the CLÁR programme are those, which have suffered the greatest population decline.

CLÁR acts as a lever to elicit money from other sources through funding and co-funding arrangements with Government Departments, State Agencies and Local Authorities. In the years 2002 – 2006, €71m was spent on investments under the Programme with related public and private expenditure in the region of €61m. Over €18.6m is available for investment under the Programme in 2007. Better infrastructure in rural areas means more people will live in them, taking pressure off the urban areas and in a completion of the circle, making the rural services more economically viable.

The Rural Social Scheme which I introduced in 2004 provides income support to farmers who provide work of benefit to their local communities.

My Department also provides a range of services to the Gaeltacht area and the offshore islands.

The combined impact of these Programmes is such that it affords practical support to those in rural Ireland whether they are interested in the establishment of a rural enterprise or doing some work of benefit to their local community in return for an income supplement through the Rural Social Scheme.

As with all things in life we must prepare to adapt and change and there is a flexibility in Irish people that when they see a benefit to themselves in terms of health or income or improved quality of life that they will adapt to the new circumstance and change it for the better. For example when the Government introduced the ban on smoking in workplaces it was said that it would not work but it has been a great success that will benefit the health of large numbers of Irish people in years to come and we are also seeing many countries now following our lead.

The same approach to adaptation and change must also apply to how we develop and implement our policies in relation to rural development in the future.

Delivering on this will be difficult to achieve but the almost trebling of funding available under the Rural Development Programme to €425.4m for the period 2007 – 13 will provide assistance in delivering on the key priorities of the Programme: the development of the small food producer and rural/agri-tourism sectors and the successful implementation of the Countryside Recreation Strategy. These developments coupled with the provision of additional

resources for the CLÁR and the Rural Social Scheme should ensure that significant progress is made in delivering on the challenges set.

The development of rural recreation and tourism is an issue of great importance for the future of our rural communities. Ireland still has a unique selling point as a country renowned for our green, clean countryside. We must protect these assets and develop the reputation of our rural areas as alternative holiday destinations both for Irish and foreign tourists. We must develop activity-based packages, where tourists can come on walking, cycling, angling and sailing holidays in a calming countryside setting. The possibilities are endless, but the supports must be made available to those who have the entrepreneurial skills to set up a business or indeed to re-focus their farm work to tourism. The implementation of the Countryside Recreation Strategy published by Comhairle na Tuaithe last September will of course be of great benefit when it comes to the development of walking/mountain biking tourism.

The theme of your congress is *the Challenge for Balance*. The measures and policies that my Department has put in place aim to ensure that balanced and sustainable development takes place. These changes will be kept under review and will be adapted to take account of the ongoing changes taking place in rural Ireland.

Ireland is changing, the rural economy is changing as agriculture is changing. As the responsible Government Minister, I am sensitive to those changes and aim to ensure that Government funding is

also sensitive and focussed to get the best value for the State generally and for rural dwellers in particular.

I would, briefly, before I conclude just like to say a few words in relation to agriculture and its importance. When buying food in a supermarket, it is easy at times to forget the fact that all of our food, virtually, is produced in rural areas and depends on the agriculture and fishing industry for its continued supply. Human beings can live without many things but we cannot live without food. In the developed world, in a period of sustained prosperity and supply, it is very easy to forget the huge challenges faced by so many people today in feeding themselves in so many countries and it is equally easy to forget the great hardship suffered in Europe sixty years ago when food production was interrupted by the Second World War. It would be true to say that one of the driving forces behind the setting up of the European Union and also behind the provision of the Common Agricultural Policy was the question of food security. It therefore is of vital importance that we maintain, in all countries, a strong and vibrant agricultural sector. I fully recognise that because of mechanisation this sector will no longer employ as many people as in the past but the industry itself is as of the same vital importance today as it ever was in our history. Complacency in this regard is dangerous and it should never be forgotten that there is a very small margin between the over-supply of agriculture products and their scarcity. We must impress on all policy makers the need to maintain a strong agricultural industry and one must note with dismay that some countries have so underestimated the importance of this vital

provider of life that they have ceased to have full Cabinet Ministers whose main responsibility is agriculture.

I will conclude in wishing you well in your lengthy Programme this week. I hope that you have a thought provoking conference and that it leads to innovative policy developments in the future. I hope you enjoy both the business and social elements of your congress and that we will see many of you visiting Ireland again in the future.

CRÍOCH / ENDS