

Alan Jagoe: Europe's young farmers need help finding land

From the perspective of farming and the agricultural industry, exciting times are on the horizon. A growing world population, new and emerging markets and a demand for quality, safe and sustainable food production are challenges that need to be met. In every member state of the European Union, agricultural colleges and universities have seen an increase in demand for agricultural education. So what is the problem?

Currently, only 6% of European young farmers are under the age of 35. In contrast, one in four is older than 65. In Ireland for example there are as many farmers under 35 as over 80! Damning statistics for a generation of farmers who need to feed the world.

Land mobility is a huge issue, too. Many farms have been fragmented because the land has been divided up amongst families. For young farmers with little or no land, this is a difficult situation. They are being enticed to work in countries like New Zealand, Australia, USA and Canada where there are opportunities for collaboration with other farmers, for example partnerships, share farming etc.

Unfortunately, such opportunities do not widely exist in Europe. This means that young farmers are now leaving the European Union and using their skills outside. For instance, there is a flow of farmers to Eastern Europe where large tracts of land are being bought by companies which hire young farmers to work the land on their behalf.

Some member states have been taking action. France uses the "Safer model" to give priority to young farmers when land is sold. In Ireland, recently a "land mobility service" was set up to act as a brokerage between young farmers and older farmers in setting up various collaborative arrangements. And finally, the European Commission has also realised the problem. For the first time ever, it has included a specific provision for young farmers in the common agricultural policy.

While there are obstacles and issues that need to be resolved, the future looks bright. As young farmers we are optimistic for the future of our industry.

Alan Jagoe is a young farmer from Ireland. He has served as President of Irish Young farmers (Macra na Feirme) and is Vice President of CEJA (European council of young farmers).

