



Smith admits difficulty in achieving greenhouse gas emission cuts

by Ray Ryan

MAKING significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture will be very difficult, Agriculture Minister Brendan Smith admitted yesterday.

"Most of our methane emissions come from our cattle herd," he told the Teagasc REPS conference in Tullamore, Co Offaly.

Mr Smith said most people acknowledge that climate change is probably the most serious challenge facing the world today, and concerted international action is needed. He said the Government is committed to delivering Ireland's contribution to the target of a 20% reduction in the EU's greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

Agricultural emissions account for 27% of Ireland's total emissions.

While this has been falling in real terms and, as a proportion of the total, it is still by far the highest level in Europe.

The available research shows that various affordable abatement strategies, like changes in diet, could deliver at most a reduction of 4% or so.

If agriculture has to meet the same 20% target as other sectors, the only way would be by significant downward pressure on animal numbers.

"In a wider, global context this makes no sense. Irish beef production is among the most sustainable in the

world. If we cut our cattle numbers, our beef would simply be replaced on world markets by beef produced in a much less sustainable way — actually making the global climate change situation worse."

Mr Smith said he had made this case at Government in discussions on climate change, and he had raised it with his European colleagues at the Agriculture Council.

A research programme carefully focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions while maintaining productivity is currently underway at Teagasc, it was revealed at the conference.

Teagasc director Prof Gerry Boyle said a clear relationship between practices that increase farming efficiency and reducing emissions has been identified.

"This can be achieved through better grassland management, improving nitrogen fertiliser efficiency and breeding higher yielding animals," he said.

Prof John Sweeney, NUI Maynooth, said the impacts of climate change globally on agriculture and food production are likely to be considerable.

He said Irish agriculture faces several challenges in the next few decades if it is to remain competitive, as global climate change accelerates.

However, the sector will be capable of adapting and most of the current crops will remain viable.