

■ NUIG and Teagasc probe emotional tie farmers have with their land

BY FRANCIS FARRAGHER

TRUE love - of their farms - is the main reason why older farmers tend to 'hold onto the land' into their later years, according to the findings of research carried out by NUI Galway and Teagasc.

One of the conclusions of the study was, that in terms of farm transfer, more than economic based incentives needed to be looked at.

"Farming is more than an economic activity. The so-called soft issues - the emotional issues identified in the research - are the issues that distort and dominate the older generation's decision on the future trajectory of the farm," the research concludes.

A summary of the findings - published in the latest edition of the Teagasc *TResearch* Summer 2018 magazine - points out that those so-called 'soft issues' have resulted in 'intractable challenges for succession and retirement policy over the past 40 years.

It observes that the so-called 'soft issues' are really the 'hard issues' when it comes to the transfer of the family farm leading to a re-examination of the 'dominant focus on economic based incentives'.

"They [policymakers and practitioners] must become more aware of, and knowledgeable about, the farmer-farm relationship identified in this research to maintain the quality of life of those concerned," the research points out.

'TIL DEATH DO US PART



Space, scenery and stock: Older farmers have a strong emotional attachment to their farms.

Carried out by Shane Conway, John McDonagh, Maura Farrell [all NUI Galway] and Teagasc Research Officer, Anne Kinsella, the study probed the deep rooted emotional attachment that older farmers had with the land.

"Older farmers were found to have developed a deeply rooted familiarity and sense of belonging in their home environment, later in life, which is notably distinct from the outside world.

"The senior generation therefore find it impossible to visualise what their lives would be like if they no longer lived on the farm or worked in an agricultural environment.

"The farm setting, and the daily and seasonal habitual rou-

times that occur therein, also offer therapeutic-like benefits to farmers by improving their quality of life in a secure and intimate arena," the study observes.



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That 'grá' for the land is summed up in the musings of one 68-year-old farmer from the Midlands who summed up his love and attachment to the land

as follows:

"Space is the most wonderful thing in the world to have. If there was something wrong or bothering me, I find there is nothing better than to just walk up the fields early in the morning or late in the evening . . .

"And then to look back across the land, and watch all my lovely cattle grazing and thriving . . . your head would be a lot clearer after that."

The research also showed that the farm and its associated practices provided a fulcrum around which social interactions could take place.

"It is therefore almost impossible to untangle a farmer's everyday social interactions from their farm.

"A farmer's relationship with their farm is also found to extend beyond the physical setting and social milieu to represent a space and environment that has a temporal [relating to time/wordly matters] depth of meaning.

"The farm represents a mosaic of the farmer's achievement over their lifetime, as well as being a landscape of years of hard work and memories."

The research recommends the establishment of a national voluntary organisation that specifically represents the requirements of the senior generation of the farming community in rural areas.

Such an organisation, the report recommends, would allow older farmers to remain embed-

ded 'inside' their farms and to integrate within the social fabric of a local age peer group.

This local age peer group would also provide them with an opportunity to develop a pattern of farming activities suited to advancing age.

"Collaborating with their younger counterparts in Macra na Feirme on various campaigns and activities would also allow the older farmers to retain a sense of purpose and value in old age.

"Such measures have the potential to finally unite farm transfer policy efforts with the psyche of their intended audience after decades of discontent," the research/study concludes.