



Supporting Irish Organic Growers in the Aftermath of Storm Éowyn: Impact on and Recommendations for Action to Aid affected Growers

Organic Growers of Ireland (OGI) statement to Minister Michael Healy-Rae at Horticulture Industry Forum Meeting 11th February 2025

1. Introduction

Minister, on behalf of the Organic Growers of Ireland, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present our concerns to you today. Firstly, I would like to give you a brief introduction to the OGI: The OGI was established in 2008 by growers for growers. Our mission is to **represent, support, grow** and **educate** the growers that contribute to the Irish organic horticultural sector. We represent growers the length and breadth of the country. These are the people who work with our soil to produce high quality, nutritious food 52 weeks of the year to supply the countries local shops and restaurants, farmers markets and vegetable box schemes.

The impact of Storm Eowyn has thrown the Irish Organic Horticulture sector into Crisis. It has resulted in severe disruption to the sector due to the extensive damage to polytunnels, glasshouses, crops, and other farm infrastructure. Many individual organic growers are facing losses ranging from €20,000 to €200,000 plus, with some experiencing total destruction of 100% of their polytunnels. This figure does not include the cost of additional business disruption caused by the storm. I will now outline:

1. The Impact of the storm on growers
2. The Challenges faced by growers in the recovery effort
3. Recommendations for government intervention to ensure the recovery of the sector

2. Impact of Storm Éowyn on Growers

- **Structural Damage:** Widespread damage to and destruction of polytunnels and damage to glasshouses with associated crop losses.
- **Crop Damage:** Destruction of crops in affected polytunnels. Field crop damage – crops are not saleable.
- **Financial Burden:** Cost of repair and replacement of infrastructure. Loss of income due to crop damage or destruction and the ongoing loss of income due to delays in successional crop planting.
- **Operational Disruptions:** Power outages, major disruption to continuity of supply of produce, loss of critical infrastructure, cancellation of seed orders.

Key Findings of OGI Surveys on the Impact of Storm Eowyn on Organic Growers

- The OGI conducted 2 surveys: An initial survey to assess the number of growers affected and the nature of the damage. (50 respondents) A follow up survey was issued

to the respondents of the first survey in an attempt to gather data on the estimated cost of the damage incurred. We have data on 25 farms from the follow up survey.

- It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the storm as there may be growers affected by the storm who are not aware of the survey.
- Respondents have also indicated that cost estimates remain uncertain as growers assess their ability to recover crops and infrastructure.
- Follow up Survey of 25 farms - key findings:
 - 25 Farms affected
 - 24 Farms with Poly tunnels affected.
 - 76 Poly tunnels affected.
 - 4 Farms with Glasshouses affected.
 - 4 Glasshouses affected.
 - 18 Farms reported crop damage.
 - 5 Farms reported structural damage to non-cropping structures.
 - No farms reported insurance cover for poly tunnels.
 - Total cost estimate of storm damage: approximately €741,000 (This figure does not capture the loss of future earnings if poly tunnels are not replaced immediately.)

3. Key Challenges Faced by Growers in the Recovery Effort

- **Cost of Rebuilding Essential Infrastructure:** Replacing a single standard commercial poly tunnel structure (30 metres x 9 metres) can cost upwards of €20,000, a very significant capital expense for growers.
- **Availability of supply of replacement poly tunnels and skilled labour to construct:** The OGI have made enquiries with a number of the leading Irish poly tunnel suppliers and I can verify that current lead times for construction vary from approx. 6 months to 9 months plus. Growers need replacement tunnels up and ready for sowing and planting without delay. An immediate solution is needed.
- **Inability to generate income:** due to crop losses in affected poly tunnels. There will also be severe income losses if damaged or destroyed poly tunnels and glasshouses are not repaired or replaced immediately to facilitate the planting of spring and early summer crops.
- **Growers are 'in Limbo':** growers need to know their options in terms of available supports before a decision can be made on replacing infrastructure.
- **Administrative burdens in accessing aid:** Administrative barriers will delay the process of 'getting back on track' in what is a highly time sensitive crisis.

4. Recommendations for Government Action to address these Challenges and Obstacles to recovery

Growers need damaged infrastructure replaced immediately. The time sensitivity of this crisis cannot be overstated.

Immediate Relief Measures

- Expedite financial aid to impacted growers with minimal administrative barriers in the form of a Horticulture Emergency Fund under 3 specific categories: 1. Protected Cropping structure damage – This is the No. 1 Priority 2. Non cropping structure damage 3. Crop damage.
- Open applications for the Horticulture Emergency Fund by February 14th.
- Begin processing applications by 21st February with a 10-day turnaround time in granting approval of aid.
- Set up Hardship Fund to assist growers who experience delays in having replacement polytunnels in situ before May 1st 2025 to compensate for loss of earnings (cut-off date for planting Summer polytunnel crops).
- Source and engage polytunnel construction teams from abroad (e.g. UK and Netherlands) in order to overcome the construction service shortage in Ireland and expedite rebuilding efforts.
- DAFM Site Inspections – Deploy inspectors and advisors to assess damage across all affected counties.
- Ministerial Site Visits – Conduct on-the-ground visits to impacted farms and growers to witness the extent of the damage firsthand.
- Coordinated Response from DAFM – Implement a streamlined approach to reduce bottlenecks and expedite support for growers.

5. Conclusions

Growers require immediate support to restore our growing infrastructure in time for the upcoming season so that we can begin generating income again. Working on the land, we are resilient by nature, but we need assistance to bounce back from this unprecedented event. Livelihoods are on the line and immediate action is necessary. Minister, on behalf of all growers affected, I am urging you to act on our recommendations and to support the organic horticulture sector in its hour of need.

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