



# Milking a cash cow and saving a planet

A farming businessman in Co Carlow has developed a new 'game-changing' technology for the dairy sector which could help tackle the global food crisis

## Roisin Burke

**L**AST week's rioting in Tunisia wasn't just over a gold-bar stealing despot and his shopaholic wife, it was also about food. Shortages of food have also brought rioters out in the streets in Algeria, Iran and India.

Prices for beef, milk, grain, sugar and other commodities have shot up to epic highs last seen during the 2007/2008 spike that caused social unrest and global inflation shocks, heaping more hell on top of the world banking crisis.

World food prices rose 32 per cent in the second half of 2010 alone, the UN's index shows. Its Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) warns that prices will keep rising. "We are entering danger territory," one of its economists said.

Meanwhile, people are breeding like rabbits. The global population is predicted to rise by as much as 30 per cent to 9bn by 2050. That's a lot more mouths to feed.

Bottom line: the world needs to produce more food. At the same time, over-farming has reduced big tracts of the US, Africa and China to

barren dustbowls and hiked up carbon pollution. So more food needs to be produced, but more sustainably: using less land, less water and fewer methane-farting cows.

One Co Carlow firm has a seriously big idea about all this.

**Richard Keenan & Company** has been a big name in farm machinery since the Seventies. Now it's an international agri-engineering business, looking at feeding systems technology for cattle.

The company has developed a patented machine and computer system called Mech-Fiber. The Mech-Fiber goal is to feed cows across the world 20 per cent more efficiently. That means major boosts in milk and beef yield for farmers, using fewer resources and upping profits.

Basically the feeding of cows on farms anywhere from Kerry to Queensland, Australia can be tracked and monitored on a server back in Ireland.

The farmer is guided in the correct preparation and delivery and nutrition of the feeds to get the best results.

Company chairman Gerard

**Keenan** says this system can deliver "game-changing" results. If you improve cows' feeding efficiency by 25 per cent, that's worth over €74,000 a year extra to a 150-head dairy herd, so the economic potential is massive.

"You're getting more from feed in cows, and so essentially getting more from land and water resources, so there's a strong **food sustainability** potential," **Keenan** explains.

"There's profitability at the heart of all this, as well as doing things in a sustainable way," he adds. "Right at the top of the list is improving farm economics. But it can't be achieved if it's not sustainable. It's converting land into food most efficiently and delivering value."

The company has lined up some seriously heavy-hitting partners in this new novation. There's listed U agri-giant ADM with its 50bn-plus turnover, French agri-nutrition firm Glon Sanders, BOCM — Britain's biggest animal feed manufacturer, and big Netherlands cop, Agrifirm.

"We're a small innovative company partnering with international players, and in the middle of all this is an Irish technology," says **Keenan**.

"We could see that there was a gap out there, that nobody else was doing this. And yet it was known that inconsistency in feeding rations is often the cause of inconsistent performance in cattle. It's a missing piece of the jigsaw."

Now it's international roll-out time.

"We've moved past the first phase data in 2009 and 2010, reproducing the kind of results we'd seen ourselves with partner companies in other countries, and now we're looking at scaling up in each of these countries and in Asia.

"We see massive growth potential for us as a company if we succeed here at fully

commercialising this technology, for our business to become a multiple of the size we are now. It's not just ourselves, our partners would see this as game-changing. This is very big."

**Keenan's** company will be showcasing Mech-Fiber to the world's big dairy-producing countries and leading agri-food figures at a global summit it is holding with Enterprise Ireland next Wednesday.

"The FAO has forecast that by 2050 demand for dairy products will be up by 40 per cent, so there is huge potential there," he says.

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**MILK IT: The bottom line is that the world needs to produce more food**

