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AGRICULTURE UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

ROBBIE WALKER ON MAKING
THE KEENAN CONNECTION

PROF GRACE MULCAHY ON
A DECADE AS DEAN AT UCD



A re-innovated Keenan

A business background, an international perspective and a positive, can-do attitude. Those sound like the exact attributes required to manage an Irish manufacturing company with a worldwide customer base. Keenan, the Carlow-based feed wagon manufacturer, has been subsumed into the Alltech organisation and Robbie Walker has taken on the role of division CEO of the company. South Africa-born Robbie already has an impressive list of achievements with Alltech. His credentials for running Keenan, however, go further back, he tells **Matt O'Keeffe**

"After completing an agriculture degree at Natal University, I took on a role in the UK managing the largest strawberry farm in that country," Robbie says. "I then returned to South Africa and set up a hydroponics company growing flowers and tomatoes. Within four years we had built up to 77 greenhouse tunnels covering two hectares supplying supermarket chains across the country.

"After selling the business, I went travelling again, this time arriving in Ireland to take on what I assumed would be a temporary job with Alltech."

An Alltech careerist

Robbie was immediately impressed by the entrepreneurial spirit of Dr Pearse Lyons and his company colleagues. After a period in Ireland selling silage inoculants to farmers, Robbie established an Alltech office in Northern Ireland. He then managed the company's Italian office for eight years before expanding Alltech across the Balkans. In 2011, returning to his roots in agronomy, Robbie moved from animal nutrition to Alltech's crop science sector, managing its European business. Global responsibility for Alltech crop science meant a move to the company's Kentucky base.

The Keenan role

Now, it's back to where he started with Alltech. Taking on the Keenan role means a lot to Robbie. He believes the company has a very positive future. The father of four sees Keenan as a truly global business completely in accord with Alltech's worldwide reach.

"My story is the story of Alltech," Robbie says. "Until we started on our acquisition drive the average age of employees was 32. It's a young and dynamic company where people are flexible in terms of job location, and can fit into a range of cultures. We have 128 offices across the world. The scale and global diversity of Alltech is worth noting. We are in animal feed additives, feed mills, pre-mixes, crop science and, now, with the addition of Keenan, in the machinery and animal dietary advice sectors."

Keenan can go far

With a good knowledge of Keenan, the decision to acquire it was taken quickly as is fairly normal under the guidance of Dr Lyons. Robbie testifies: “It’s an iconic Irish brand that we were already familiar with from previous collaborative initiatives.

“Keenan can go very, very far.” That is the summation of the new MD’s prospects for the Borris-based company. “What has been built over the past five years is astounding. The In-Touch system is a world first. We had Keenan at the Alltech One symposium in Kentucky in May and there was spectacular interest in the In-Touch concept. We have a winner on that side. The Keenan feeder itself can produce a mechanical fibre mix that is highly digestible. So the combination of machine and data is, I believe, a winning formula. The real synergy will come from the association with Alltech. Access to 128 offices around the world, as well as to thousands of farms and nutritionists, allows us to leverage a range of synergies to the benefit of everyone involved. Keenan is another vehicle to get us closer to the food producer. Our natural feed additives, our feed mills and, now, the actual feeding machine can deliver a fully integrated system. The Keenan wagon brings benefits alongside the Alltech feed solutions. It doesn’t mean we will necessarily be selling the two hand in hand, but it is a natural option for our customers. The new arrangement will bring Keenan closer to the feed industry and maximise collaborative benefits.”

A robust business model

Robbie is insistent that the Keenan business model is robust and fit for purpose: “The previous management invested heavily in setting up In-Touch. It is an extremely innovative platform. Together with a major expansion the company was hit by a general economic downturn. That placed immense financial pressure on the company. There is a very strong innovation platform in place that can now be leveraged under Alltech management. Our business strategy is to ensure that In-Touch, as a data-harvesting and interpretation system where the farmer can have direct interaction with nutritionists over the phone, is financially independent. It is not a marketing gimmick but is a service that can deliver value to clients. On the other side, the actual machine must also perform well financially. There is a commitment to Mech-Fiber. It is a way of presenting the

total mixed ration (TMR) to the animal that is as close to nature as possible. We retain the fibre to the benefit of the animal’s digestive system and, ultimately, to the animal’s productivity. If we were to produce a tub feeder it would have to be able to deliver Mech-Fiber quality forage. That’s what differentiates our feeder system. We sell nutrition wagons, not just mixer wagons.”

Ambitious growth plans

Growth prospects are ambitious under the new management. Across the Alltech organisation there has been 20 per cent growth year-on-year since 1980. “So that’s the base level for Keenan also. Within five years the expectation is to hit €100m sales. Success will be measured in a strong presence in at least 40 countries. In our first two months to the end of June, we produced 100 machines with a strong sales pipeline. Our target is to be in profit in 2017.” Allied to the expansion in wagon sales, Robbie and his colleagues expect to roll out the In-Touch system globally. “Currently, it is active in Ireland, the UK and France, with some support for South African and Canadian farmers from our Kilkenny IT base. We see scope for immediate expansion into Germany, Australia, New Zealand and more intensive services to South Africa and Canada. Then, the Netherlands, Spain and Scandinavia are viable options being considered.” Keenan management is committed to servicing non-Keenan machine owners and also retro-fitting older Keenan feeders with the In-Touch technology in the belief that this will impress those clients as to the benefits of the full Keenan feed system. “In-Touch is an entirely novel, Irish-developed and operated system and will now be accessible to Alltech’s 5,000 employees across the globe as they interact with farmers and feed mills.”

Optimistic outlook

Taking a contrary view of the dangers of Brexit, Robbie sees the positive potential of recent developments: “We are insulated from the fall-out from Brexit with a well diversified global business including Keenan. Generally, I believe this is potentially good for Irish agriculture. The industry is overly dependent on the UK. This will force Irish companies to diversify sales and will highlight the need for increased innovation in its food products. Adding value before export must be a priority. In the long term, this will be good for Ireland.”



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Real Farms; Real Results

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Milk Fat
+0.04%



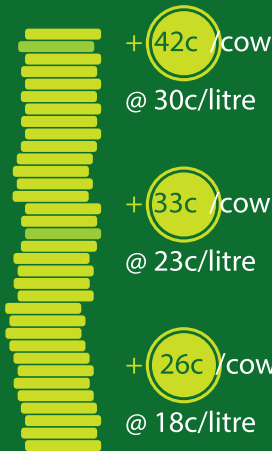
Yield
+1.27 litres



Intakes
-0.19 kg

Gross margin

IMPACT



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to beef
place

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Feed efficiency
increase
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Finished
cattle hitting
specification

30%
silage saving with
spring calving
sucklers