

Luck of the Irish

By Meghan Sapp

Beet Ireland is moving forward at last with its new sugar plant post-quotas.

Some call its stubbornness, others call it perseverance or vision, but you've got to hand it to Beet Ireland: they won't give up the dream of a sugar beet renaissance in Ireland.

For 13 years, sugar beet has been nothing but animal fodder. The land needs the beet as part of the four-year rotation with cereals and potatoes, but some still think fondly on the days when the Irish Sugar Company, later Greencore, was an industry to be proud of.

With the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy in 2005 sugar production in Ireland was ostensibly ended “forever” though only until the end of sugar production quotas in 2015—that later became 2017. For the better part of the decade, Beet Ireland has represented the chance to go back to those glory days of sugar production as soon as possible.

Now they can, but getting farmers and investors on board hasn't been as easy as they may have thought or hoped. Over the years, Fine Gael and Sinn Fein have both supported the return to sugar, but the minister of agriculture last year said it was up to the private sector to do the heavy lifting.

Greencore very clearly said it was against a return to sugar, even after the European Court of Auditors said the Irish industry had been in pretty good shape when it shut down.

Whether it was County Cork or County Mallow where a previous factory was or even County Tipperary, they've all been potential locations for this mythic new sugar industry. But this week Beet Ireland announced it was purchasing a 200-acre site near the Carlow-Kildere border where it plans to site the future plant. The group has had an eye on the site since 2015.

Back in 2013, the estimated cost of the new facility was around EUR400 million though a more current figure hasn't been thrown about lately. Beet Ireland says it has a viable business plan in hand and is looking at a farmer cooperative model to take the project forward. With cereals prices far less remunerative for farmers than sugar beet, farmers are expected to pile into the project, if they can.

Slow and steady wins the race, for sure, but to start a new industry almost from scratch is going to require nothing less than the luck of the Irish. Good thing they may have some around.