

Using the Internet for...

Farming



Using the Internet for Farming

by Willie O'Dowd, Longford County Library.

Lifesteps offers you a range of online and printed guides. Written by staff from Irish public libraries, each guide contains easy to follow, step by step explanations of how to use the Internet to achieve a specific goal or 'life step.'

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Note: words in red appear in the glossary at the end of this module.

Introduction

This guide tells the reader about online resources which are particularly relevant to the farming community. It focuses particularly on online information regarding **farming finance** and **farming and the environment**. The guide gives a wealth of reviewed Web links which provide access to agricultural information.

This guide is intended to show Irish farmers how the Internet can become a valuable tool in the day to day running of their farms. For those who are not already familiar with the Internet, it has many advantages including:

- (1) It gives access to a global collection of information beyond the boundaries of any one organisation, institution or country.
- (2) The Internet is one of the most up-to-date information sources available. Details of new directives or changes in Government policy are often reported as they happen.
- (3) As well as using the Internet to search for relevant information, tools such as discussion lists, newsgroups and e-mail provide users with a way to debate issues of concern.
- (4) The Internet is a low cost method of finding information. For the cost of a basic PC (the Internet is also available in all public libraries in Ireland) and a local phone call, users have access to the world's largest library. Although some websites have subscription fees, the majority do not and the sites that we will look at later are completely free to access.

For the purposes of this guide, three areas will be focused upon where the Internet can prove invaluable:

- (1) Farming **finance** and assistance.
- (2) Farming and the **environment** including farming alternatives, current EU Directives, the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme and organic farming.
- (3) **General** farming advice. This can range from online editions of farming journals to advice for younger farmers or general animal care.

Need to Know

In order to get the most value from this guide, the reader should have a basic working knowledge of computers and the Internet.

Need to Have

There are no particular items that the reader needs to have while using this guide, apart from a PC and an Internet connection.

Related Guides

For those without an existing knowledge of the Internet, the **'Internet Basics'** guide is recommended reading.

Quick Guide

Finance

- For information on **farm finance** on the Internet, see the agri payments section of www.agriculture.gov.ie, the website of the Irish Government's Department of Agriculture. A step by step guide to this site is provided.
- The same site offers a number of useful **downloadable** forms.
- More financial advice is available from Teagasc (www.teagasc.ie) and from a number of other websites (see the links section for details).

Environment

- There is excellent environmental information on the EU's websites at www.europa.eu.int.
- Information on Rural Environmental Protection Schemes can be found on the Teagasc site (www.teagasc.ie), with the environmental aspects well covered by the website of The Irish Peatland Conservation Council (www.ipcc.ie) and the website of The Heritage Council (www.heritagecouncil.ie).
- The links section also covers farming alternatives such as forestry, fish farming and organic agriculture.

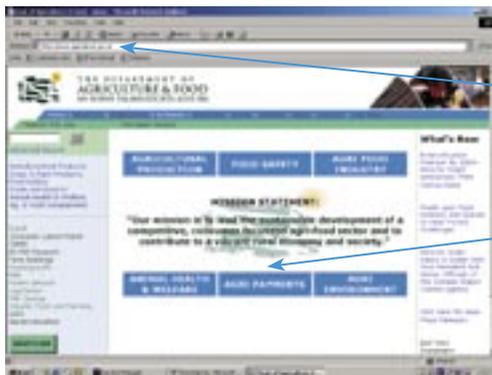
General farming

Good general farming sites include the *Farmers Journal* (www.farmersjournal.ie), the Farm Tractor and Machinery Trade Association (www.ftmta.ie), the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (www.icbf.com) and Macra na Feirme (www.macra.ie).

Step-by-Step Guide

Farm Finance

One of the best sites giving details of the various types of farming assistance and finance available (and indeed farming information for Ireland in general) is www.agriculture.gov.ie, the official website of the Department of Agriculture and Food.



Address
www.agriculture.gov.ie
is entered here

To get to the Agri
Payments section
click here

Downloading forms – an example

The **Agri Payments** section gives details of the main areas of assistance available at the moment and also gives details of various forms that can be downloaded and printed. For example if we are looking for an Area Aid Application Form, we can click on **Agri Payments**, then **Area Aid Applications** and then the **Area Aid Form** itself.



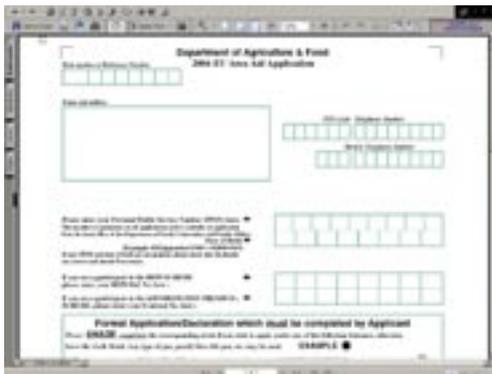
Click on this link
to view **Area Aid
Applications**

This screen should now appear.



Click here to download the form

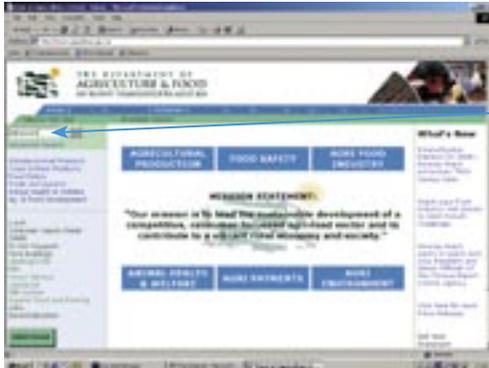
The downloaded form can now be printed off (some can be filled in electronically and returned by e-mail).



This is an easy way to obtain official forms. A lot of forms available for **download** (as in the above example) are available in the **.pdf** format to make downloading quicker. To view these, a product called Adobe Reader is required. This product is free and can be obtained using instructions provided in Appendix 1.

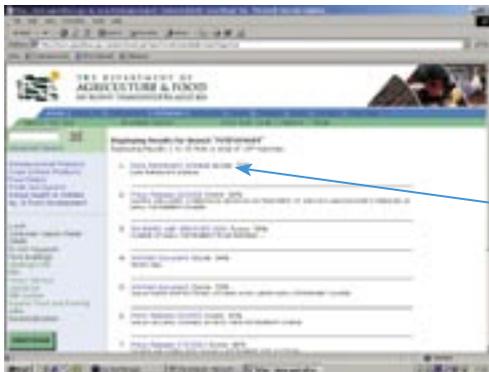
Searching

The www.agriculture.gov.ie website also has another important feature found on many sites, a **search** facility. This can make finding the information you require much faster as you can immediately input the term you are looking for, without having to go through the links provided by the site. Suppose we are looking for information on planning for retirement and its financial implications for farmers. If 'Retirement' is typed into the search facility a number of articles appear.



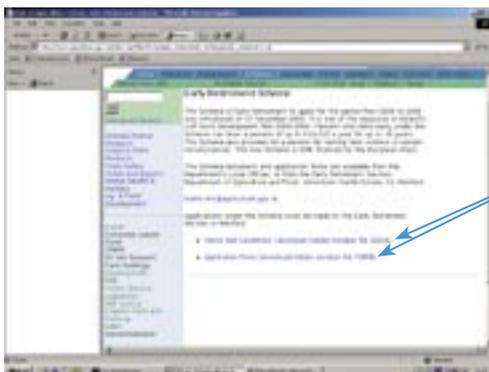
Type the word 'retirement' here and click 'Go'

We should get these results:



Click here.

Here, each link mentioned has a mark out of 100 for relevance. If we click on the first link (with a relevance of 70%), we are given the following screen:



We can click on the below links if we want to download official forms or see terms and conditions.

Once again, we can see the amount of information available and the value of the Internet both as a means of retrieving information and obtaining official forms.

We have now looked at one site www.agriculture.gov.ie in some detail both by following the links it provides and using its own search facility. This site is one with a great deal of information for Irish farmers and worth a detailed look. As this is a Government website it does not suffer from problems of irrelevance associated with many commercial websites and is regularly updated.

Other useful websites for farm finance

Other sites have more information on farming finance and assistance. These include:

www.teagasc.ie This is the official website of **Teagasc**. The information provided is not as detailed as the site of the Department of Agriculture but it does provide an easy to understand overview as well as important e-mail addresses. Its **EU payments** section in particular offers easy to understand advice in what is often a difficult area. It also offers a **search** facility.



Here we see details of EU payments with links to more information on each as well as its own search facility.

Other sites worth mentioning include:

- www.europa.eu.int The website of the European Union giving details of all European financial agricultural assistance available, although the amount of information presented can at times be daunting.
- www.pobail.ie The website of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. This Department administers a number of development initiatives specifically targeted at rural communities including CLAR, LEADER and a host of community and voluntary programmes.

- www.ifa.ie This is the official site of the Irish Farmer's Association. This gives up-to-date information on a wide variety of issues of concern to Irish farmers including a guide to farm schemes. This site is illustrated below.



There are also a wide variety of commercial sites offering help with running your farm including:

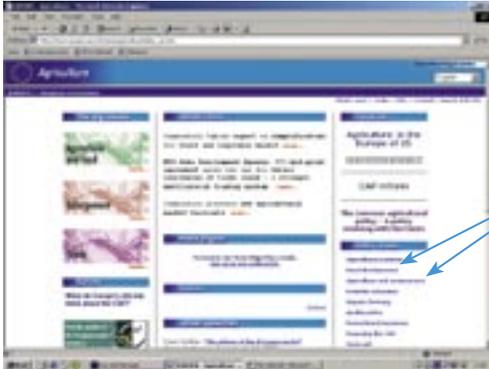
- www.boi.ie The official website of the Bank of Ireland.
- www.aib.ie The official website of Allied Irish Bank.
- www.nib.ie The official website of the National Irish Bank.

All of the above sites (a small example from the many available) have links to farming finance and give details of the services they offer to farmers.

Farming and the environment

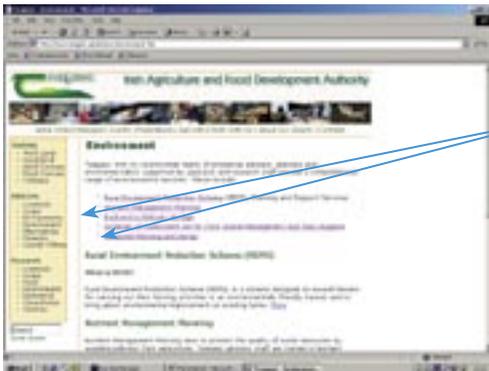
Over the past two decades, major and rapid changes have taken place in an effort to make farming more environmentally friendly, and to move away from traditional farming methods to new methods or alternative farming enterprises. The Internet is once again a useful tool as it can provide current and relevant information in what is a rapidly changing area.

As many developments in this area are EU driven, an especially useful site detailing present and possible future developments is www.europa.eu.int. Clicking on the **Agriculture** link and we get the website illustrated opposite.



Clicking on the links below show us the importance the EU now places on environmentally responsible farming and gives current information on developments.

The Teagasc site at www.teagasc.ie is also good in this area, giving details of various environmental initiatives as well as alternatives to current farming practices.

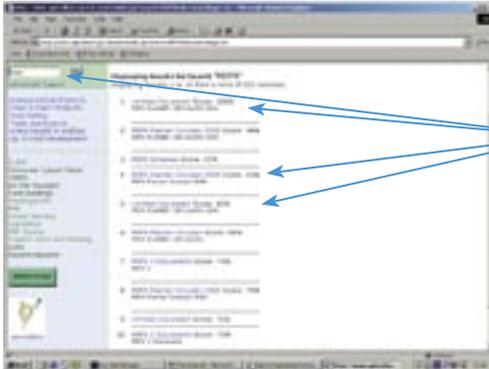


The following links give details of current environmental initiatives and alternative ventures.

An aspect of environmental farming mentioned in the site above of special interest to Irish farmers would be the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS).

Two sites which show details of conservation aspects of this scheme are www.ipcc.ie, the website of The Irish Peatland Conservation Council and www.heritagecouncil.ie, the website of The Heritage Council. In addition to providing information on the REPS, both sites also provide information on environmentally friendly farming in general.

www.agriculture.gov.ie contains a vast wealth of information on this area.



By typing in "reps" into the search screen we are presented with the following options. Each are given a percentage based on relevance.

Again, this site gives an opportunity to download official application forms and circulars.

Online information about farming alternatives

- As mentioned earlier, environmental farming often involves farming alternatives. www.coillte.ie gives details of forestry investment and rates of payment.
- www.irishforests.com provides a useful start for those considering forestry as an alternative source of income.

There are also a multitude of sites giving information on organic farming in general. These include:

- www.bim.ie The website of Bord Iascaigh Mhara and www.marine.ie both give an overview of the present stage of commercial fish farming in Ireland.
- www.sustainableireland.ie Gives a brief overview of current developments in organic farming.
- www.planorganic.com A site that provides farming news from Ireland, the United Kingdom and Europe.
- www.bordbia.ie The official website of Bord Bia which also incorporates the website of Bord Glas, giving details on all aspects of horticultural production from a producer and consumer perspective.

General farming websites

So far we have concentrated on looking at how the Internet can be used in helping farmers in two specific areas, financial planning and assistance and environmental issues. There is also a wealth of general farming information available for the Irish farmer, including:

- www.farmersjournal.ie This features the current online edition of the *Farmers' Journal*. In addition, a very useful feature of this site is the ability to search through back issues as far as 1998.

Courtesy of The Irish Farmers Journal



To search through back issues click the '**special editions**' button here.

We are now taken to this screen where we can see copies over the past six years.

- www.ftmta.ie The website of the Farm Tractor and Machinery Trade Association of Ireland. This is a very useful website for any farmer wishing to buy used farm machinery as it gives details of what is available and from what trader.
- www.icbf.com This is the site of the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation, an organisation with the aim of improving the Irish national cattle herd genetically. Its links section also provides links to other cattle breeding societies in Ireland and abroad.



- www.macra.ie is the official website of Macra na Feirme. This site offers its own search facility as well as information useful for young farmers.



- www.ruralni.gov.uk A site aimed at the farmer in Northern Ireland but containing much useful advice for farmers and growers everywhere.

For more websites on all the sections discussed above, please see our website at www.lifesteps.ie

Final Notes

Although the websites mentioned above cover a large area of Irish agriculture, the amount of information certainly is not exhaustive. Search engines such as www.google.ie provide a means of searching the entire Internet.

For full details on using Google and other Internet search engines, see the **'Internet Basics'** LifeSteps Guide

Glossary

- Broadband:** A type of Internet connection. A broadband connection provides very rapid connection to the Internet with fast download and viewing of web pages, online forms, etc. Widely available in urban areas and spreading into the countryside. Broadband connections may use the telephone line, but in any case do not block the line for other types of use (e.g. phone calls).
- Dial-up:** A type of connection to the Internet which uses a standard home telephone connection and a device called a 'modem' which allows computers to access the Internet over the phone. A dial-up connection is relatively slow (it takes a long time to download web pages, forms, etc. compared to other types of Internet connection), and it also blocks the domestic phone line for other users.
- Download:** The process of copying a computer file from the Internet onto your own PC is called downloading. A file such as a music (MP3) file or a document is made available to the Internet by storing it on a server. To download the file, you usually click on a link to it, or else right-click and choose 'save target as' (in Internet Explorer) or 'save link as' (Mozilla Firefox). A box pops up asking you where on your hard disk you want to store the file. You choose the location for storage, click the button and the file is copied onto your hard disk (or downloaded).
- Email:** **(Electronic Mail)**
Email or electronic mail is a service that sends messages across the Internet from one human user to another. Like a letter, email is person-to-person and it stores messages until they are read.
- Internet:** A large collection of computers, connected together to allow them to share information with one another.
- ISDN:** A high-speed telephone line service available from Eircom. ISDN allows you to connect to the Internet while still having the telephone free for other use. It also allows faster Internet downloads (about twice as fast as a dial-up connection).

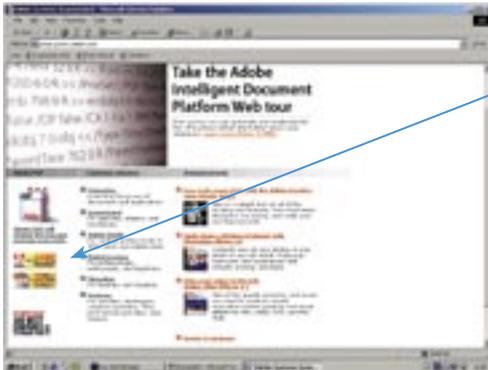
- Link:** A link, or hyperlink, is a part of a web page that, if clicked with a mouse, opens a different web page. Links are usually shown in blue and underlined on a web page.
- PDF:** **(Portable Document Format)**
A PDF is a type of computer file (in the same way that an MP3 or a Microsoft Word file is a type of file), which is commonly used on the Internet for presenting documents. PDFs are excellent for printing out – a printed PDF generally looks much better than a printed (HTML) Web page. PDFs are thus mainly used for material which the user is expected to print out (such as Government forms, brochures, reports), rather than material which is meant to be viewed online. PDFs require a specific piece of software, a PDF viewer, to be viewed and printed out. By far the most common PDF viewer is Adobe Acrobat, which is available for free online.
- Search:** Searching is the process of finding a particular word or topic within a website or on the Internet. When you search, you type in one or more words which describe what you are searching for, and a search engine program looks up a database and shows a list of links to pages that may match what you are looking for. When you search, it is up to you to have some idea of what you are looking for – you have to type in the words to search for. Searches vary in scope – many websites allow you to search the site and all its pages; bigger search engines such as Google allow you to search the whole Internet. Typing CTRL-F lets you search the web page you are looking at.
- Search engine:** A program running on a web server computer which creates and maintains a directory of web pages on the Internet. The engine has a web page with a form; you type in words describing what you are looking for; the engine looks up its directory and sends back a list of web pages that it thinks will fit your search criteria.

Appendix 1

Downloading Adobe Reader

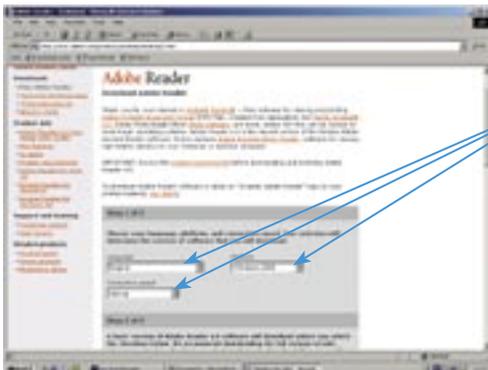
Many documents we wish to download may be compressed in .pdf format. To read these, Adobe Reader will need to be installed on your computer if it is not already present. This can be done in a few easy steps:

(1) Go to the www.adobe.com homepage.

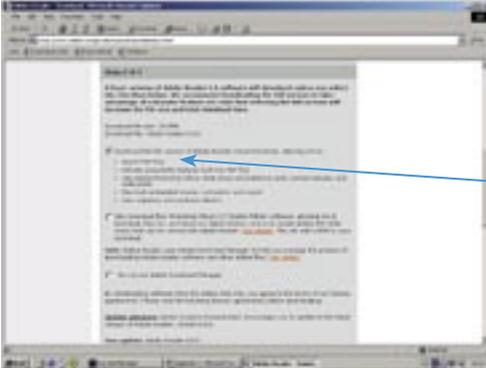


Click on the reader link to start download.

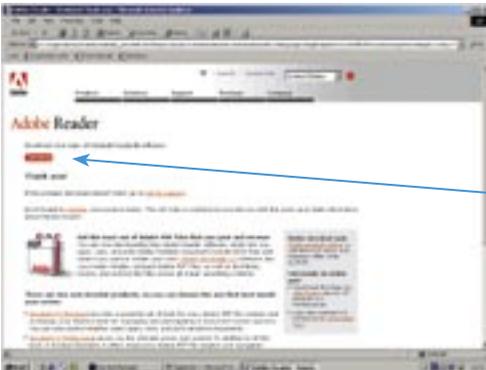
(2) Click on the Adobe Reader link and fill out the details of your computer's operating system e.g. Windows 98, 2000 etc and your connection speed (dial-up or broadband). Then follow the on-screen instructions until the download is complete. It may take a while especially when using a normal phone line as the file is quite large. You have now installed Adobe Reader and will be able to read .pdf files.



Enter Language, Platform and Connection Speed details here.



Click the following box to download the full version of Adobe Reader. Then click the **'continue'** button at the bottom of the page.



Click the **Download** button and follow on-screen instructions until the download is complete.