

IFA reviews its 'factory levy' as farmers opt out

THE IFA has said it will review the controversial 'factory levy' in which money is deducted from farmers on the sale of produce.

The levy is collected on all farm sales to co-ops, processors, marts and merchants and equates to 0.15%, or 15cent per €100 in sales.

The acting president of the Irish Farmers' Association, Tim O'Leary, says the embattled lobby group will look to 'address the issue', as marts all over the country report farmers are requesting to opt out of the payment.

The levy is believed to generate up to half of IFA income and is automatically deducted. Farmers can opt out by simply indicating an intention not to pay, but many were said to be unaware of this fact.

When asked if farmers' requests

By **Darren Hassett**

to cease the deduction was a cause for concern for the association given that is almost half of the IFA's annual revenue, Mr O'Leary admitted: 'We are going to review that and we are going to see how it works and address that issue. Some of those reports I would imagine are a bit exaggerated.'

'It is a very understandable initial reaction from farmers.'

Mr O'Leary, the association's deputy leader, has taken over Eddie Downey's duties on a temporary basis. Mr Downey resigned as president last month over the severance deal agreed with the IFA's former general secretary Pat Smith.

The farmers' organisation has

an annual income of about €13million, raised through their 88,000 members' subscription fees and the 'factory levy'.

But Mr O'Leary says he is not concerned over a potential membership decline after it was revealed that Mr Smith was earning more than €500,000 a year in pay and pension contributions and walked away from the association having agreed a €2million severance package. The Cork native said: 'I think that farmers recognise that they need a strong association.'

Meanwhile, as news of the review is announced, Tom McCarthy, the manager of Bandon Mart in Cork, says approximately 20% to 25% of farmers coming to the mart have looked to opt out of the controversial payment.

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Take the time to send Christmas cards... they are a gesture of love

IHAVE retained so many of them, so many memories wrapped in yuletide joy. As they fly through the letterbox, there is a scramble to see who they are from. In a world of instant communication, where people rarely commit anything to paper, the Christmas card is a towering symbol of real communion.

Sending a Christmas card involves effort and time, neither of which we have in abundance. What makes them so special nowadays is that people make the effort to do something that could easily be done by text. Except, of course, that a text costs virtually nothing, demands no effort and can be deleted in an instant.

Writing a card requires a certain ritual, one that few of us still practice. It demands selecting and purchasing your cards, boiling the kettle and, over a hot brew, carefully crafting your sentiments. You don't have the convenience of a 'Send' button, so it requires the added effort of going to a post box.

I can see the whole thing dying out in my lifetime. Why, when you can send something in a second, would you bother going through all the hassle of sending a card? Why would you waste a day doing something that costs a pretty penny and consumes so much energy and time?

With those questions, my sons' generation may well kill off something which has been so integral to my life. What happens, however, when the last card has been sealed and sent, when we no longer think of those we might otherwise forget?

For we all know that the Christmas card is a tangible way of keeping in touch with people we might never see from year to year.

The demands of life are such that people often lose contact. They don't do so intentionally, but simply because they are overburdened with worries and cares. Christmas comes and, quite suddenly, they yearn to reconnect.

They sit and pour out their news in a card. They craft it lovingly and seal it with blessings for this sacred season. And even if they have nothing special to say, the card itself signifies that you mean something to the sender, that you have not been forgotten.

It is a beautiful ritual that binds us to the past, to an era when people made time for each other. In each card, you can sense the person and feel their good wishes. In their handwriting, you can identify marks and traits of their personality.

That is why I have kept so many down the years. To me, they are not just cards, but precious items that contain the spirit of each sender. In

reading them, I hear the person's voice, feel their presence and remember them fondly.

It doesn't matter how long you have been out of touch. Once a Christmas card arrives from a long-lost friend, it rekindles what was and what can be again. It is a way of reaching out to people from your past, a gentle way of showing them that they will always mean something to you.

It helps, of course, that we are more inclined to remember others at Christmas. Indeed, it is a season of memory, a time when the mind longs for those Christmases of yesteryear. We think of those who once sat with us around the table, but who are no more.

We recall the magic of Santa, the glorious atmosphere of Christmas morning and the long, lazy days that followed. As we recall all that, the heart opens and we desire to reconnect with lost things.

We seek to summon up the ghost of Christmas past and it is then that a card falls to the floor.

It is simple, yet so profound. To read real handwriting, and to hear a voice echo through that paper, is a rare but wonderful experience.

As I say, it is more than mere communication; it is nothing less than heartfelt communion.

Christmases come and go. Each year, however, we all get older. That is easy to forget as we coast along in the fast lane.

THE Christmas card ritual is a way of slowing time down. It is a way of reminding ourselves that we won't be here forever and that each Christmas is to be cherished and savoured. It is a way of showing people that you care and, however much time has elapsed, that they still matter to you.

As you write, don't rush. Pen each card with care and affection, pouring out your personality on the page. In such small things you will find the true essence of Christmas, for what you are sending is nothing less than your love.

If love can be contained, if it can be held and put away for safekeeping, it is in the form of a Christmas card. For this is a gift that has taken time, effort and thought. It is something that has been sealed with a kiss and with the spirit of the sender.

And then, for the 12 days of Christmas, it will stand proudly on the shelf - a testimony to lasting friendship and timeless memories. It is as though you have opened up your home and surrounded yourself with those who have made all your Christmases come at once.

In yet another home, something of you sits on someone's shelf. More importantly, a little part of you has found a home in their heart.

—mark.dooley@daily@mail.ie—

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