

Committee Name: Regional Horticultural and Potatoes Board
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Meeting Date: 20 September 2016
Location: Skype conference call
Chairman: Alex Godfrey
Secretary: Gordon Corner
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Present: Gordon Corner, Alex Godfrey (chairman), Mark Leggott, Simon Bartlett, James Grant, Anthony Hopkins, Mark Nundy

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 10 May were approved

Matters Arising

Basic Payment Scheme

There were still around 13,000 corrections to payments that haven't been made and they are hoped to go out in the next month or so. Anthony Hopkins brought up the fact that he had been inspected in consecutive years and he was going to take this up with Richard Wordsworth. Mark Nundy noted that he'd been paid in the last few days. The secretary was asked to email Richard Wordsworth's phone number so people could take up their BPS issues with him. James Grant raised his appeal, it was unsuccessful, he did feel it was right but it was against the Defra policy.

The Living Wage

The living wage was mentioned but the fact that it would come up in the Brexit discussions meant it was moved later on down the agenda.

Round table

Mark Leggott's sprouts were struggling but starting to grow now, he thinks they will be all right in the end; the peas were below average but viable. Mark is not lifting any potatoes, but digs looked good and he thought the yield would be around 12-15 tonnes per acre.

Simon Bartlett noted that cereals are better than expected, the last drill suffered a bit and the veg has struggled with the cold spring, however, the kale is good and Simon noted that everything would be late. Potatoes are lacking in tuber numbers so the yield will be down but the quality will be very good.

Mark Nundy reported a very slow start to vegetable growing, he had quite a lot of pest problems although quality is good; at the moment vegetables are in short supply so the prices are better. In the lead up to the meeting there had been price increases of up to 10-15% from all the seed manufacturers, no one knows why. It is assumed that it's something to do with Brexit, or that's the excuse they're using. Verimark is the new crop protection chemical which is doing very well. Mark has needed to put a lot of foliar feed on his white cabbage but it's actually looking quite good.

James Grant reported that the peas are not that good; they didn't make the tonnage. James has some big rain issues, on one day he had 70mm of rain in 90 minutes. There were a lot of drainage issues given the amount of water. Potatoes are average, the land is full of water quite early on in the autumn.

Alex Godfrey reported that the yields of peas were awful and the quality was dreadful. Potatoes are lifting now but are well below average yields; quality is good.

There was a discussion about peas as they have been particularly bad this year, it was wondered how many people will stay in peas.

Brexit

NFU Consultation

Several members reckoned it was not particularly impressive and the presentation was too generic; it wasn't good enough for the horticulture element. James Grant thought the options that were given out in the document were not well understood and a regurgitation of the pre Brexit paper. He thinks it needs to be much more pro UK based. Although James filled out the questionnaire, he had to tick quite a lot of don't knows because what he wanted wasn't there. Anthony Hopkins said that we shouldn't be too focussed on EU and we should look for other markets other than Europe.

Labour and availability

There was a long discussion on this. The national board opinion is that the Australian points based system has been ruled out and what we need to make sure is that the government understand that fact that were looking for full time labour as well as just seasonal labour, although the immediate focus is on seasonal labour as it is a more urgent problem and is thought to be politically more straightforward. The argument on permanent labour needs to be skills focussed. Horticultural skills will need to be pushed, i.e. potato grading etc. is a skill even though it does not require a qualification. Mark Leggott said we need to be working with the GLA and get rid of project fear because it's driving down the number of migrant workers that seem to be around at the moment. There seems to be a shortage of them. James Grant said that we need quality labour, if you look outside Europe you probably won't find it.

Quality of accommodation

The organisations and businesses that have good accommodation tend to attract good workers and keep them. Mark Nundy employs 15-20 people, they've been with him for a long time and he's slightly concerned because they've mentioned to him that they don't know what is to happen to them so there is that uncertainty. The secretary undertook to ask Matt Warman the MP for Boston whether he'd like to visit Mark Nundy and talk to him about the labour issues.

Trade

It's clear that the trade issues that were brought out in the consultation document had not been well thought through. They are just a regurgitation of what was put before Brexit. Production standards and issues need looking at because they are all part of what trade policy we want. There is a view that we need to form a focus group with importers/exporters and that should be run at Stoneleigh. James Grant said that we should trade with anyone we can and Anthony Hopkins mentioned that in his view, he imports and exports to other countries and it's not too difficult. In actual fact he uses an outside company to do his paperwork of which there are many and it's very good.

Crop protection

The board thought there was a massive opportunity for us because we wouldn't have to follow the EU directives and probably go down the MRL route rather than banning, however, it's thought the view was that CRD lacks the experience and currently they've been hiding behind EU rules, the board believes they should be properly resourced to be able to do the job. It's believed they want to have a more strategic approach than CRD and with that a more positive attitude from the civil service. One view is that we automatically re-register all chemicals after Brexit for a period of time to allow CRD to get their house in order.

Plant health

Again there are many opportunities to reduce costs by using our island status to prevent plant pests and diseases arriving here. We need to make sure that we have a fit for purpose quarantine system so that we have spot checks and there is a close liaison between the EU and the UK and that we have

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random inspections which are essential. We should not reduce the funding for plant health inspectors. We should ask for more funding to bolster the standards.

Domestic Agricultural Policy

We discussed producer organisations and we need to have a good look at this and see how we can take it forward. There should also be tax breaks for investments to provide greater security and self-sufficiency.

Headquarters board report

AHDB: it was thought that we should make sure the funding we direct to research is targeted in the way we want it to be and it was recognised that it is the sector panels in AHDB that need to be targeted to get them to do what needs to be done.

Chelsea will hopefully be discussed tomorrow along with the caravan consultation and the idea is that there are basic levels for caravan accommodation but in the end it needs to be a reasonable quality.

There was some discussion about potato growers and the dissatisfaction with the lack of meetings and representation and also the value of money they get from AHDB potatoes, we also want to see transparency in the pack houses improve.

We looked at the meetings we would have between now and Christmas and perhaps have a potato growers meeting in the New Year to address some of their concerns.

Member engagement

The brassica breakfast meeting is coming up on the 12 October. Sam Nundy, head of trade at Tesco's will be speaking along with Emma Hamer, NFU head of crop protection talking about pesticides. It is felt that once we know more about what is going on from Brexit and the labour point of view that we should hold a meeting because that would effect a lot of people.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will take place on the 1 December, it will be held at Uppingham (NOT at Greetham) which will allow Skype for business to be used by those that don't want to travel.