**COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE**

**SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS**

**Westminster Hall Debate**

**“Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme” (Neil Parish, Con, Tiverton and Honiton)**

**Thursday 6 July, 3.00pm**

**Background**

* Access to labour is one of the three central issues facing farmers and producers as we leave the EU, along with trade and support payments.
* Approximately 80,000 seasonal workers are employed in the UK every year; the vast majority of these people come from countries within the EU. Access to the EU labour market is vital for many farmers and producers and helps support the wider food supply chain.
* There is increasing concern about the ability of UK farmers and producers to recruit the workers they need at crucial times of the year. In June this year three separate reports confirmed this difficulty, including a survey that found 78 per cent of growers have found recruitment harder than last year.
* The Government must address this issue as a matter of priority, and should consider reintroducing a Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, which was removed in 2013.

**The importance of food and farming**

* The food and farming sector is nationally important, contributing over £108 billion a year for the UK economy and employing one in eight people according to [a recent Government report](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/515048/food-farming-stats-release-07apr16.pdf). It is particularly important for our most rural areas where farming is often central to the economic and social life of the community as well as playing a vital role in conservation.
* UK agriculture underpins our food manufacturing sector by providing over 60 per cent of the produce and raw materials involved. This is a vitally important sector, sustaining 3.8 million jobs and contributing over £21 billion (GVA) to the economy every year. Food manufacturing is nationally important and benefits communities across the UK, although it has particular importance in many rural areas. The UK’s new relationship with the EU, including future work and travel arrangements for seasonal agricultural workers, will be vital to the success or otherwise of food manufacturing in this country.
* The ability of the UK to produce its own food must not be undermined. In a volatile world, food security remains important and the ability to produce food domestically must be safeguarded. Food security should not be mistaken for self-sufficiency as the UK will continue to import food and agricultural produce, just as it will continue to export. Food security will be achieved by ensuring fair competition for UK farmers and producers in EU and securing access to the EU labour market has an important role to play in this.

**The importance of seasonal agricultural workers**

* As part of the Single Market, our food and farming industry benefits from the free movement of people which has provided access to labour from across Europe. People from the EU play an important role in harvesting, production and processing across the food supply chain, in both skilled and unskilled jobs.

* The UK Government must consider how our future relationship with the EU will enable people to travel to this country to work in our food and farming industry, particularly at important times of the year. UK farmers and producers employ approximately 80,000 seasonal workers every year, the vast majority of these people come from countries within the EU. This could increase to 95,000 by 2021 according to [research by the NFU](https://www.nfuonline.com/assets/80290).
* The UK Government should consider the reintroduction of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), or similar scheme, which allows a person to enter a country to undertake a specific role with a specific employer for a set period of time. [The UK Government removed the SAWS in 2013](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/seasonal-agricultural-workers-scheme-and-the-food-processing-sectors-based-scheme) following the removal of freedom of movement restrictions on people from Romania and Bulgaria. The reintroduction of the SAWS, or similar scheme, could be one way to help UK farmers and producers in the event of removal of freedom of movement after the UK leaves the EU, and the Government should consider this immediately in the light of current difficulties.
* Any new travel scheme for agricultural workers should also include the requirements of other land-based industries such as game farming and forestry. Game farmers are not included in the definition of 'agriculture' in the Agriculture Act 1947, so any new scheme will need to adopt a broader definition of ‘agriculture’ to ensure that people from the EU can continue to work on UK game farms. Evidence also suggests that people from the EU are important in particular sub-sectors of forestry such as the nursery trade, woodland establishment, fencing and machine operating. Many of these rely on seasonal labour to fulfil particular requirements, so it is important that this is also taken into account in the development of any new scheme.

**The current difficulties**

* There are indications that it has already become difficult to recruit people from the EU following the referendum result in June last year. The decrease in the value of (£) sterling combined with uncertainty about the UK’s future relationship with the EU has reduced the appeal of working in the UK for some people in Europe. In order to ensure that UK farmers and producers are able to attract the labour they require, it is vital that the UK Government provides clarity on work and travel arrangements with the EU as soon as possible.
* Last month three separate reports confirmed the challenges faced by farmers and producers in recruiting sufficient seasonal agricultural workers to meet the industry’s immediate and future needs.
* [17 per cent fewer workers have come to work on British farms](https://www.nfuonline.com/news/latest-news/drop-in-seasonal-workers-leaves-some-farms-critically-short/), leaving some businesses critically short of people to harvest fruit and vegetables, according to an NFU survey.
* The NFU also reports there were [1,500 vacancies on British farms during May](https://www.nfuonline.com/news/latest-news/drop-in-seasonal-workers-leaves-some-farms-critically-short/).
* [1 in 5 fruit and salad growers do not have enough pickers](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-40354331) according to a BBC survey.
* The BBC also found that [78 per cent of growers believe that recruitment has been harder than last year](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-40354331).
* British Summer Fruits predicts [prices for strawberries and raspberries will rise by 35 to 50 per cent](http://www.britishsummerfruits.co.uk/html/news.htm) if Brexit restricts access to EU labour.

**The Countryside Alliance calls for:**

* **Government to recognise the importance of the food and farming industry and the role of seasonal agricultural workers as part of this.**
* **Government to prioritise the requirements of the food and farming industry in the negotiations on our future work and travel arrangements with the EU, and provide clarity on this as soon as possible.**
* **Government to recognise the current difficulties in employing seasonal agricultural workers, and immediately consider the reintroduction of a Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme.**
* **Government to ensure that any new SAWS, and our future work and travel arrangements with the EU, include the requirements of related sectors such as game farming and forestry, and are not confined to the 1947 Act definition of ‘agriculture’.**

**For more information please contact:**

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