JERSEY FARMERS UNION

Jersey Farmers Union – COVID Response Review

Contents:

1. Background

Whilst many industries were severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and had to close for a period, agriculture was classified as an essential industry and therefore remained working throughout.

However, remaining "open for business" was not straightforward and the industry was severely impacted. This report details some of those impacts and the financial implications suffered.

2. Accessing Staff

- A base line of staff was in the Island prior to lockdown in March.
- However, the industry needs another 350 workers or so for the harvesting and packing of potatoes and the growing and harvesting of summer vegetables.
- Travel impacts and the fear of catching Covid made recruiting these staff very difficult, and with the travel disruption, the cost of travel substantially increased. Whilst hospitality and other staff filled some of the gaps, there was a shortage on most farms of skilled staff, e.g. tractor drivers.
- Some of the larger businesses had to move their office staff to remote working, leading to further increased IT costs.

3. Protecting the Workforce / Island Community

- The industry was aware that bringing in 350+ staff to the Island brought the risk of not only introducing Covid-19 to existing staff but also the risk of spreading the disease in the Island.
- The industry went to great lengths to ensure that any new staff were well isolated so that the risk of infecting existing staff was minimised. Most growers kept incoming

staff in accommodation that was separate from those already there, and in the case of the Jersey Royal Company they liaised with the Government Contract Tracing Team to isolate all incoming staff in selected Jersey hotels until deemed safe for the staff to integrate with other JRC staff in JRC accommodation. This significant additional cost was borne by JRC.

- JRC were also asked by Contract Tracing to keep a block of accommodation separate for isolating staff in case of an outbreak.
- Additional PPE (masks, gloves, face shields and coveralls), cleaning products and sanitisers had to be purchased at great cost to the whole industry, particularly at the outset of the pandemic.
- Screens and line markings had to be added to packing stations in the packhouses and on harvesters across the industry.
- Social distancing was a particularly difficult issue to control;
    - Food in catered accommodation had to be prepared, distributed and eaten in individuals rooms rather than the communal dining rooms.
    - To prevent the workforce mixing in large numbers in the community the industry worked with local retailers to purchase shopping and distribute to individuals accommodation.
    - Minibuses were reduced from carrying 9 people to 5 requiring additional vehicle trips and /or extra vehicles.
    - Social distancing of teams in the fields required supervisors allocated to specifically monitor this.
    - Harvesters and pack lines had to work at reduced capacities and therefore longer hours at increased cost.
    - At the onset of the pandemic the JFU and growers had to deal with numerous calls from concerned public, authorities and police who saw large groups of people working in fields, albeit at a social distance.
    - Additional PPE (masks, gloves, face shields and coveralls), cleaning products and sanitisers had to be purchased at great cost to the industry, particularly at the outset of the pandemic.

4. Covid-19 Impact on Sales

- Retail sales suffered during the pandemic, particularly during the 2020 season
    - Shoppers were reluctant to queue to do their shopping resulting in fewer shopping trips
    - People shopped for basics just as Jersey Royals were coming into season and so they were not featuring on peoples shopping lists.
    - Jersey Royals are often an impulse buy and shoppers were not impulse buying

    - People avoided purchasing loose products and so loose Jersey Royal sales fell sharply.
    - With less shopping trips, larger pack weights were preferred, with shoppers favouring maincrop potatoes in 2.5 – 5kg pack weights rather than 500g to 1kg packs that Jersey Royals are sold in.
    - Overall exports and local sales therefore suffered dramatically.
- Retail sales recovered in 2021 as normal shopping behaviour started to return

5. Financial Impact

- The financial impact on exported produce is constituted by loss of sales at high returns, closure of markets, and the extra cost of working during the pandemic.
- The growers who grow all or part of their crops for the local market were particularly impacted by the first lockdown and the closure of many hotels and restaurants.
- Once again, it is difficult to understand why local wholesalers were allowed to claim for financial assistance when the growers were not. It was the grower who had to dump produce, and who took the largest hit.
- It is estimated the total financial cost to the agriculture industry was over £4 million pounds.

6. Government Support

- As you can see from the information above, despite the agriculture sector continuing to work, the physical and financial impacts on local agricultural business have been huge.
- The industry received no Government support, despite numerous requests for aid related to isolating staff and loss in revenue.
- Staff who applied for aid as a result of not being able to work whilst isolating were also refused funding and so individual growers had to financially support them.
- Agriculture was one of the very few industries that received absolutely no support as a result of the pandemic. This is on the back of already diminishing returns and added stealth taxes that have been introduced over recent years.

Jersey Farmers' Union

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