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NFU horticulture policy update January 2021

A summary of NFU activity on behalf of members across the protected ornamental sector over 2020

COVID-19 Pandemic

2020 has been an unprecedented year and an extremely challenging one for protected ornamentals with the March national lockdown seeing the closure of garden centres across the country. The NFU worked around the clock to support its members across the ornamental sector through this difficult time, highlighting the devastating effects a spring closure of garden centres had on the industry, and working with government and stakeholders to identify solutions. The NFU Horticulture team harnessed support from key industry stakeholders and successfully secured the re-opening of garden centres in the first relaxation of restrictions, ensuring their listing as “businesses providing essential goods and services”, preventing further closures throughout the year. At the start of the crisis, the NFU worked with growers to enable businesses to conduct distance selling and gained reassurance from Defra that they would continue their pragmatic approach to newly introduced plant passporting rules. The NFU also worked with British retailers to prioritise shelf space for British ornamentals during their peak season, allowing continued sales where possible over this initial lockdown period. The NFU held numerous regular meetings across government, including with Defra and the Treasury, and the financial industry to raise concerns about ornamental growers’ access to CBILS and Bounce Back loans and the need for grant aid for those growers who had to dispose of stock. Working with industry partners, including the HTA and AHDB, the NFU highlighted the needs of ornamental growers to government.

The NFU also directly raised concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on the ornamental sector with MPs across the country, producing two ‘Write to Your MP’ tools, one for growers and one for the public. Over 350 letters were sent, reaching over 200 MPs. Further to this, the NFU held briefing sessions with MPs and members of the House of Lords, directly leading to MPs requesting that the Secretary of State for Defra, The Rt Hon George Eustice MP, support NFU calls for garden centres to reopen, financial grant aid for growers, and better access to CBILS.

With the disappointing decision by government not to award an ornamental compensation scheme, the NFU continued to work with Defra and other government departments to support ornamental businesses. The NFU continued to highlight the need for grower access to financial support available, and as part of the Ornamental Horticulture Roundtable Group, is working with Defra to ensure future government policies are fit for purpose to enable a speedy recovery for the sector.

The NFU has also helped to guide businesses in managing COVID-19 on their farms, working with Public Health England and other government bodies to ensure guidance and regulation on farm is practical, pragmatic and safeguards worker and public health. The NFU has worked directly with farms to help manage outbreaks and produced case studies and articles to help members stay COVID-safe.

Post-transition EU-UK Plant trade

Advisers, board members and officeholders across the NFU have worked tirelessly on behalf of members to gain clarity on the new controls introduced for EU-UK plant and plant products trade post-transition. The NFU called for as free and frictionless trade as possible, acknowledging the risks posed to the trade of plants and young stock from delays, barriers to trade, and added cost or administrative burden. Also highlighted was the need for government to take a pragmatic approach to trade, balancing good biosecurity with thriving businesses, calling specifically for better clarity on new controls to be introduced, a smart risk-based approach to assessment, and clear, concise and consistent communications to growers of new rules. The NFU secured a commitment from government around place of destination (PoD) checks with the release of the APHA service level agreement and gained clarity from Defra on a range of issues raised including the multi-drop policy, Defra’s physical check

regime and PoD requirements. In response to NFU raising concerns, APHA also confirmed a delay to fees for new inspections, committed to exploring an extension to the PoD system, and worked to secure the necessary equivalency agreements to allow continued exports of previously prohibited young plants to the EU. Further to this, the NFU involved members in a series of Defra workshops to directly highlight practical issues growers faced from new rules.

To ensure members and their businesses had the right information to prepare as much as possible for the end of the transition period, the NFU hosted two virtual meetings, with speakers from Defra plant health and NFU policy advisers, to explain new rules in place and update members on developments. Further to this, a wealth of articles and information has been continuously updated on NFUOnline to ensure members have the information they need to know at their fingertips.

The NFU will continue to work to secure improvements to border control and plant health policies that facilitate the smooth trade of plants and plant products in 2021 and beyond, balancing good biosecurity with thriving businesses. Already the impacts of new border controls and phytosanitary certification have been felt by the ornamentals sector, and the NFU team will continue to monitor the trading situation between the UK, EU and NI, highlighting member concerns and issues to Defra to ensure as smooth trade as possible for exporting and importing businesses as spring approaches.

Labour

Following a long and extensive campaign by the NFU, the government announced the Seasonal Workers Pilot scheme has been extended for 2021, with an additional 30,000 visas available for people who want to come and work on UK farms. This campaign has been championed across the NFU from sector teams to regional offices and officeholders, taking NFU asks directly to the Prime Minister.

Disappointingly, the commitment from government was a simple one-year extension to the pilot, meaning ornamentals remain excluded. The NFU is speaking to Defra about timescales for extending the scheme to cover the ornamentals sector. The NFU has also worked with Home Office and Defra colleagues to highlight concerns around new UK Immigration policy and communicated information to members on the EU Settlement Scheme. In addition to this, the team worked with the Pick for Britain campaign to advertise horticultural seasonal work to UK domestic workers in order to reduce shortages of seasonal labour across the sector for the 2020 harvest season. Pick for Britain will run again in 2021 and the NFU will continue to support the campaign.

AHDB strategy and ballot

With the on-going AHDB strategy consultation and horticulture ballot, the NFU will continue to help members access the information they need to make an informed decision on the future of the statutory levy and will continue to represent growers' interests on the AHDB's proposed reforms to deliver better grower representation and value for money.