

15 September 2014

**Migrant labour makes significant contribution to UK dairy farm labour force - RABDF survey**

Migrant workers are making a significant contribution to the dairy sector with one third of producers having employed foreign labour, according to an independent farmer analysis carried out by the Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers. However a question mark hangs over their future in terms of training and sourcing, together with the on-going issues of intra-community flow of EU residents and the UK remaining within the EU.

“If the Central and Eastern Europeans went back to their native countries then dairy farming would be in dire straits as so many farmers are now dependent on this migrant labour force,” explains RABDF policy director, Tim Brigstocke. “That’s an oft quoted statement which was confirmed by RABDF’s migrant survey, believed to be the first of its kind in the sector taking in 250 producers of which 52% had more 200 cows.

 “Almost 40% of the respondents had encountered staff recruitment issues in the last five years, the reasons commonly given amounted to difficulty in finding quality, skilled workers. Those issues led

32% of the respondents to employ labour from outside the UK and the vast majority - 93% agreed it had been a very successful option.

 “Most employees – 57%, were from Poland, with a significant number from the Baltic States, particularly Latvia along with a range of other countries outside the EU, from the Philippines to New Zealand. Almost 56% of farmers indicated they expected them to stay for two years or more; very few regarded them as transient or temporary.”

Almost 60% of the migrant labour had been recruited directly, very often through word of mouth. In fact on certain farms it had almost become part of a family tradition for the out-going person to find a new person from their home country. One third came from a specialist dairy labour agency, whilst very few were sourced via the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) which ceased to operate in 2013. Recruiting direct was rated as easy by 58% of farmers, whilst 37% felt it was satisfactory but would consider alternatives.

 “Willingness to work took priority for 94% of respondents when seeking a new member of staff followed by being a team player, and having technical and appropriate communication skills.” Finally the survey drilled down further to find out why farmers used migrant as opposed to UK labour. “62% of cases said there was insufficient UK labour available, however there were also question marks about value for money whilst some had special attributes - it’s a fact that many Central and Eastern Europe citizens are highly qualified and therefore provide excellent head herdsmen.

 “Overall, the survey has provided impartial and independent information to determine for the first time ever the true situation on dairy farmers since quite amazingly, Government does not collect any such data on migrant labour, nor does anybody else in the sector,” says Mr Brigstocke. “We will be sharing our survey findings with Government and the sector at large, in particular agricultural colleges who quite clearly have a role to play in training migrants to overcome language difficulties.”

He adds: “The RABDF migrant survey was carried out in 2014 at its numerous farm walks and open days and more formally via its membership. We would like to extend the number of responses from 250 to 2,500 to bring further clarity to the situation and subsequently make some firm recommendations to solve the various issues surrounding migrant labour.”

-ends-