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GBC drives home sustainability message

Speakers highlight the growing importance of sustainability to the berry business at the Global Berry Congress



David Farrell of Blue North (left) speaks at the Global Berry Congress

Sustainability was the overarching theme of the Global Berry Congress 2020, which saw over 550 expert speakers and delegates come together virtually to discuss the industry's key trends.

Cindy van Rijswick, senior research analyst at Rabobank, gave a global overview of the fruit and wider food business, highlighting that there is more interest than ever from consumers and retailers over where things come from and how they are produced, making it increasingly important for companies to demonstrate the impact of their products on people and the planet.

Rabobank also conducted a survey earlier in the year to identify the biggest areas of concern for the agriculture business in terms of sustainability. "The top five issues seemed to be chemicals, packaging, energy, water, and waste and losses," she explained. "Different sectors and countries had different worries – for example in the fruit sector, water was often mentioned as

fresh produce. Human rights, worker conditions – these social issues are also key and should be high on everyone's list."

Van Rijswick recommended that companies open discussions with stakeholders over sustainability concerns and issues, before making a plan prioritising certain areas that will help lessen environmental impact. "What is most important is to measure everything you do, because without this you cannot manage your issues," she said. "There are an increasing number of tools available to help you achieve your sustainability goals."

The Covid-19 pandemic had really driven home the message that helping others, and our planet matters, van Rijswick explained. "There are definitely opportunities – new markets to supply, new channels, online, and there is the possibility to develop new products."

David Farrell of South African consultancy Blue North, backed up van Rijswick's opinion that the Covid-19

pandemic had actually led to a greater focus on sustainability.

"That would be my take on it, and I'm not sure exactly why that is – perhaps because we are seeing just how vulnerable we are to unforeseen events that can cause major disruption?" he said.

"The motivation to get on board with the sustainability agenda is to pre-empt risks that can blindside you," Farrell continued. "I just think that overall, if you look at policy that's emerging out of the EU and UK, the questions around biodiversity impact on businesses, carbon emissions and climate change – there seems to be a growing impetus in terms of legislation, retail strategy and so on. I don't know if that's all down to the pandemic, but there is definitely a sense that the stars are aligning."

"We have seen, as a consulting business, requests come in above our expectations during the lockdown period, so as a litmus test that's a good indicator that there is a growing interest in the

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the number one issue. Packaging is also a key issue in

sustainability agenda," he added. "We hope this represents a permanent shift in attitude."

Another key area, waste reduction, was the target of Mihai Ciobanu's presentation, the Fresh4cast chief executive first highlighting that the UK's household waste comes to a staggering £12.8bn annually – often driven by short-term price promotions that push products on the customer.

"So what is effective in fresh, if not promotion?" He asked. "The first thing

to do is, during pre-season planning, run several iterations of demand and production scenarios together, basing them on different weather assumptions, to work out where the risks and opportunities are. "Secondly, during the season, improve your accuracy 4-8 weeks forward, allowing you to plan activities that drive penetration. Finally, if there is excess volume that you need to deal with, consider alternative routes. If you are giving it away anyway, give it to people who cannot afford your products normally – this is better from a CSR perspective, it's better for the planet, and it's good for business."

With household waste covered, Ciobanu turned his attention to the other end of the supply chain and labour waste, or waste on the farm. He explained that accurate forecasting would lead to a better expectation of how much ripe fruit existed in each field, leading to optimised picker allocation and therefore less wasted product.

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