Leadsom ‘will be open for business’ on labour, says NFU

The NFU is confident the new environment minister will be receptive to the fresh produce industry’s labour needs in post-Brexit negotiations.

The NFU has said it is hopeful that Andrea Leadsom will be “open for business” in discussions over the supply of fresh produce labour post-Brexit.

Talking at a seminar on post-referendum issues at the Fruit Focus technical event in East Malling, Kent, the NFU’s vice president Guy Smith praised the new environment secretary for her direct and business-like style.

“I met Mrs Leadsom when she was at the Department of Energy and Climate Change,” he said.

“I found her very direct, very business-like and I like that. She was straight-talking. We knew where we were and we could talk direct back to her.”

He added: “It was not quite the style of Liz Truss, which was a little bit more rhetoric rather than delivery... I do think she [Leadsom] will be open for business.”

The supply of seasonal labour to the fresh produce industry is at the top of the NFU’s agenda in its negotiations with the new government post-Brexit.

There are an estimated 25,000 non-British seasonal workers picking, packing and processing fruit and vegetables in the UK every year and the industry is particularly reliant upon Eastern European temporary labour. 96 per cent of the 8,000 staff placed by recruitment firm Hops were from either Bulgaria or Romania.

Smith emphasised the need to convince Leadsom of the business case for supporting agriculture and horticulture in order to bring “certainty and stability” to British farming in the immediate future.

The NFU is urging growers to invite their local MPs out onto their farms to remind them of the importance of agriculture at a time when legislation is being reconsidered in many areas.

And assuming that freedom of movement will be restricted post-Brexit, the NFU has begun lobbying government on access to visa-restricted labour – not only from within the European Union, but from anywhere in the world.

The organisation revealed that it has a meeting coming up with the new head of Defra “very soon.”

Ali Capper, chairman of the NFU horticulture and potatoes board, said the body may also be open to alternative schemes for attracting seasonal and permanent labour such as an Australian-style points-based system, a refugee scheme or a Commonwealth option.


© Copyright Market Intelligence Ltd - Fruitnet.com 2014. The copyright on this article and all content published on Market Intelligence Ltd - Fruitnet.com is held by Market Intelligence Ltd - Fruitnet.com Limited, a joint venture between Market Intelligence Limited and Dr Rolf M Wolf Media GmbH. All rights reserved. Neither this article nor any part of it may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, including print-outs, screen grabs and information retrieval systems, without the prior permission of the copyright owners.
“The most important thing is that we secure a labour force of both permanent and seasonal workers for all of our businesses quickly,” she said. “We have to have a completely open book dialogue with government.”

Crop protection, trade and plant health are the three other key issues that the NFU will prioritise in its consultations with government and its own members in the coming weeks.