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By Fred Searle

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Farming leaders warn of 80,000-worker shortage



CLA estimates coronavirus could create huge shortfall in agricultural labour, calling on British residents to step in to save this year's harvest

Agricultural bodies and fresh produce growers are calling for a 'land army' of British residents to get out in the fields and pick fruit and veg.

This follows warnings from the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) that travel restrictions and illness could create a shortage of up to 80,000 agricultural workers in the UK.

Government and industry figures show that over 60,000 seasonal labourers come to the UK each year, predominantly from Eastern Europe, to help complete annual harvests. Yet travel restrictions are expected to make it almost impossible for farmers to access the labour they need.

The CLA is therefore calling on people to take up jobs on farms to save this year's harvest and stop businesses going bust.

The organisation is estimating that 75 per cent of these workers will be unable to enter the UK due to coronavirus-related

restrictions on the freedom of movement. This leaves a shortage of 45,000 workers.

Once a potential infection rate of 20 per cent is factored in for all workers on farm, another 35,000 people could be removed from the workforce. To cope with these changes, the entire industry will therefore require 80,000 employees, the CLA said.

The association stressed that time is of the essence: vegetable growers are already beginning to crop and soft fruit – which must be picked within a three-day time period – is due to begin in April.

Demand for labour comes at a time when thousands of people find themselves suddenly out of employment.

The CLA is urging people to seriously consider taking up positions in Britain's agriculture and food processing sectors, which it says "offer decent rates of pay and more varied roles than people think".

CLA president Mark Bridgeman said: "A

shortage of 80,000 workers is something we have never seen before. This is why we are calling for a 'land army' of employees to support farmers in feeding the country.

"We need urgent government assistance to help source workers and advertise positions. Time is of the essence as many farmers will soon begin, or have already, begun planting or harvesting.

"Farms and rural businesses are already suffering from the winter flooding and uncertainty over future international trading relationships. If we fail to find these key workers, businesses will go bust."

The National Farmers' Union also called for urgent action. "Growers who rely on seasonal workers to pick, pack and grade our fruit and vegetables are extremely concerned about their ability to recruit workers this year," a spokesperson said.

"The industry is already working hard to promote roles on farms locally,

recognising that this could help those who

Last week the government announced that

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<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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unfortunately find themselves out of work. We are urging the government to address this situation as soon as possible.”

workers in agriculture and food processing would be included as 'key workers' and offered emergency childcare provision.

issue: among other things the closure of the schools is limiting labour supplies for fruit and vegetable planting and harvesting.

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