

AHDB receives formal ballot request

Group of horticulture growers submit request for ballot on levy future, as AHDB welcomes opportunity for open debate

A formal request for a ballot on the future of the AHDB Horticulture levy has been submitted to the organisation.

The development follows a campaign by a group of vegetable and flower producers, who have called for an end to the statutory levy, arguing it is "not value for money".

According to the process set out in statute, AHDB will now validate that each ballot has come from a levy payer that has paid the levy within the previous 12 months. If there are the required number of valid requests, AHDB said it will set in motion the process to run a ballot, including procuring an independent company to administer it.

AHDB Horticulture board and staff said they welcomed the opportunity for an open debate on the important role of the levy collected from growers, arguing

that the funding is the backbone of horticultural applied research and development to address crop protection, labour, resource use and technical innovation.

"The body of work undertaken by AHDB for horticulture is wide-ranging and we will be using this opportunity to showcase to levy payers, and the wider industry, the value we add and the services we offer," said Ruth Ashfield, strategy director for horticulture.

"However, we need to be clear this ballot is about the future of AHDB Horticulture. It is not about looking at updating the way levy is collected or how the levy spend is allocated. It is not about reform under the request for views commitments. It is about whether AHDB will continue to provide a statutory levy-funded service to horticulture growers or not. That is the only question allowed in this ballot under



L-r: AHDB Horticulture's Ruth Ashfield with growers John Bratley, Peter Thorold and Simon Redden, who delivered their ballot papers to the levy body this week

"All other discussions, like how we can get growers more involved or whether there could be a voluntary levy or a vote every five years on what we do, form no part of this discussion."

Efforts to engage

Vegetable grower and ballot co-organiser Peter Thorold said the group had repeatedly tried to engage with senior representatives of both the industry and politicians. "But despite the fact that our ballot achieved a response rate above 33 per cent - well above Defra's own call for views - there has been little recognition of the depth of feeling that exists among growers towards this outdated and undemocratic tax on their businesses," he added.

"Over the last six months AHDB have repeatedly said that if growers feel strongly enough about the levy, they should use the existing legal procedures

current regulations.

to trigger a formal ballot on the continuation of a compulsory levy, so with the mandate that we received from our survey, that is what we have now done. We fully expect a fairly conducted AHDB ballot to endorse our findings.”

AHDB to unveil new strategy

New AHDB chair Nicholas Saphir [has already trailed a new strategy](#), promising improved communication with growers and a review of the levy system for horticulture and potatoes. He will be expanding on this during his interview at [FPJ Live on 6 October](#).

Ashfield pointed to the key services currently offered and the ongoing

liaison on improving efficiency and engagement for growers, adding she is confident the majority of farmers and growers believe there is a clear role for a levy-funded organisation, and the five reforms recently committed to by AHDB will make it even stronger and better equipped to drive the industry forward.

“At a time when the horticulture industry faces unprecedented challenges and changes, our investment in applied research on crop protection, emergency chemical approvals and driving labour efficiency is more important than ever,” she added: “We appreciate not everyone

likes everything we do, but most horticulture businesses, particularly those who engage with us, do value the essential grower-led research programmes. Under the simple ballot question, triggered by the delivery of the petition today, those benefits could be lost to all.

“We would rather work with industry to enhance our offering, modernise the way levy is collected and continue to work with growers to improve efficiency and profitability in this important sector.”