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By Fred
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Potato growers “fed up” with AHDB levy, say petitioners



Lincolnshire vegetable and potato grower John Bratley

Ballot organisers hit out at R&D body and its plans to reform following announcement of a second vote on future of potato levy

Potato producers have had enough of paying “an overly bureaucratic organisation” which offers them “little or no benefit”, AHDB petitioner and potato grower John Bratley has said.

His comments follow the announcement that a ballot on the continuation of the statutory potato levy will go ahead in the new year.

The ‘yes or no’ vote on the future of AHDB Potatoes, and the work it does on behalf of UK potatoes growers and buyers, will take place from mid-February 2021 for four weeks.

With a ballot on the continuation of the horticulture levy set to take place in January, the move means two of AHDB's six sectors have now questioned the reasons for the R&D body's existence.

and grows between 220 ha and 280 ha of potatoes each year, said: “Our own ballot of 661 growers in July showed that 92 per cent of growers feel current AHDB policies are of no, or marginal, benefit to their business, while 80 per cent of growers did not want to pay a statutory levy.

“Like many growers I receive little or no benefit from the levy. As I am in competition with other growers, AHDB's policy of ‘knowledge exchange’ for everyone means that any technical advice which will give me a competitive advantage has to come from elsewhere.”

Potato growers currently pay £42.62 per planted hectare, with their customers paying a further 18.58 pence per tonne purchased.

Because the levy is paid on planted area, it does not reflect yields, crop losses (a particular issue over the last two years)

Bratley added: “AHDB simply fails to understand the commercial reality of how growers’ markets work. In terms of its recently published plans for the next five years, where are the radical changes that both Defra and growers have been asking for?”

Criticising AHDB's recently published five-year strategy, ballot co-organiser Simon Redden of Redford Flowers added: “AHDB have spent the last few months trumpeting their new strategy document, but the 38-page brochure is full of empty promises with no substance and offers nothing for the horticulture or potatoes sectors.

“There is nothing to address the lack of benefit they have provided for the last 12 years, and it doesn't recognise that if growers or their associations organised research, then the growers themselves

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Bratley, who is co-organising the ballot

and crops which fail to find a buyer, the petitioners pointed out.

would be entitled to 230 per cent tax relief, something which is lost to the industry with AHDB funding R&D.

“Furthermore, the plan for levy reform which AHDB chair Nicolas Saphir has been promising since his appointment is actually to do nothing at all for 18 months. After this, potato growers may be able to appeal for a refund on their payment based on the existing mechanism, while the proposals for horticulture lack any real detail and would still leave many crops and sub-sectors without representation.”

Vegetable grower Peter Thorold added that the mixed messages coming from AHDB show the organisation has “lost its way”.

He said: “Nicholas Saphir’s acknowledgement that there are ‘differences between the challenges facing sectors and even within sectors’ is welcome, but the strategy document

doesn’t provide any information on how the organisation will address these.

“It simply promises more of its existing projects from which many growers derive no benefit at all.”

Responding to these criticisms, AHDB chairman Nicholas Saphir said: “We have both listened and responded to growers and remain fully committed to engaging directly with levy payers to better understand their needs on a much more granular basis.

“In the AHDB Change programme and strategy, we address both the issue of delivering value, alongside sector priorities. As we have previously stated, the document is out for consultation and once AHDB has a full understanding of the needs

of each sector, programmes and budgets will be created openly with levy payers.

“The [Town Hall meetings](#) have been organised to give us the opportunity to discuss the work of AHDB while also gaining valuable feedback from our levy payers as we approach a period of massive change, not just for AHDB, but for the whole industry.”

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