

Labour shortages and surplus tomatoes

The issue of labour shortages in our sector was recently raised in parliament and in the media. Together with other growers and with the NFU, we're supporting the **#backbritishfarming** campaign and raising awareness of crucial issues such as labour shortages which are preventing farm crops from getting to consumers.

Good weather and great production conditions brought Thanet Earth a crop flush of tomatoes at key weeks this summer. As our permanent workforce has a finite capacity, we need short-term additional workers to help pick and pack at times like this. A shortage of workers meant we wouldn't be able to get the full crop to shelf in good time. As much as possible was diverted to food charities (local and national) with the remaining crop routed to compost. If these tomatoes had been sold in supermarkets then we calculate the missed sale at some £320,000.

We hate to see good food wasted but finding workers for short term seasonal jobs is very hard at present. If the Seasonal Agricultural Worker scheme was extended and made permanent (it's just a pilot for now) then that would provide a solution for the long term. In the short term a 'Covid Recovery Visa' scheme would also really help. The picture at Thanet Earth is now back to normal, but we know this issue will arise again. Our colleagues in other farming sectors (like apples and pears) are facing similar issues now.

We've had a few recurring questions raised about the issue so we thought we'd answer some of those here. If you have a question you'd like us to answer, drop us a message to: mail@thanetearth.com

Can't you open up and let people pick their own tomatoes?

Our greenhouses have to be closed to the public – they're classed as factories and we have to be very careful to protect our plants from virus risk. There's just no way we could open the greenhouses to the public.

We do not have a farm shop on site – it's not environmentally sustainable to encourage people to drive to us to buy or collect tomatoes only. Nor are we resourced to staff such a facility. We do already supply product to local independent retailers and farm shops.

Give the surplus product to charity?

We already do! We work with local charities and food bank initiatives to redistribute as much as possible to reduce waste and share the benefit of healthy food. We also give regularly to FareShare who take our excess products and share it through their network. If you represent a local food club or charity that would like to apply for surplus product from Thanet Earth then please get in touch – mail@thanetearth.com

But Thanet has a high unemployment rate – can't you recruit locally?

Our agencies recruit locally but as these shortages relate to short term work, it's sadly not always feasible for the local, long term unemployed to apply. We and our agencies are very happy to hear from anyone who is eligible to work and wants to apply, whether it's for short term, contract or permanent roles.

Are low wages the problem?

Wages are above minimum wage, starting at £9.02 per hour for our glasshouse agency workers, with flexible start times and the opportunity to earn more with productivity.

Maybe it's the working hours?

Early starts are required in agriculture, but starting at 6.30am means that on a typical 8 hour shift you're finished at 2.30pm. This can work very well for some families with children at school.

Transport?

Our workers live all over the local area, so it would be impossible to transport everyone in. The rural nature of our setting makes public transport a challenge too, but we encourage cycling to work and there are many car sharing teams. Local bus services do run within walking distance of the site.

Do you want to work at Thanet Earth? Get in touch to find out more.

To ask about fixed term contracts or permanent work in our packing factory or warehouse and distribution facility, email recruitment@thanetearth.com

For seasonal work in our glasshouses or packing factory, contact:

Pro-Force www.pro-force.co.uk, visit their Facebook page <https://m.facebook.com/thanetearthjobs/> or call 01622 685259

Gap personnel www.gap-personnel.com or call 01843 844149 / 07740 824852