

PRESS RELEASE

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Ballot provides mandate for change to AHDB

A grower's ballot of almost 2,000 levy-payers from the Horticulture and Potatoes sectors of the Agricultural & Horticultural Development Board (AHDB) shows the majority of growers view the levy organisation as outdated and unwanted according to the returns.

The ballot was organised by three Lincolnshire growers, known as the AHDB Petitioners who collectively grow potatoes, vegetables and flowers with a combined turnover of £20 million. The ballot was sent to 1,967 growers in total, although despite a Freedom of Information request, AHDB did not provide a full list of levy-payers to the independent polling company Civica Election Services Ltd (CES) which ran the ballot. Responses were received from 585 horticulture *or* potato levy payers, 55 growers who pay *both* horticulture and potato levies, and 21 other individual levy payers – a total of 661 responses (a response rate of 33.6%).

With a response rate over 33 per cent, the exercise has been hailed as hugely successful compared to the Government's call for views in 2018 which received responses from less than 0.5 per cent of levy-payers, a paltry response by any standards.

Flower grower and ballot co-organiser Simon Redden comments: "We believe that the AHDB's refusal to provide details of all levy payers has denied some 1,800 growers from having a vote, a very undemocratic move. We are disappointed that the NFU did not agree with Defra's recommendation for a five-yearly ballot on the future of AHDB and their enthusiasm for Defra's heavily flawed review. The NFU members who have voted in this ballot have provided a clear mandate for the NFU to reverse its previously held position."

The key findings from the ballot are:

- 92% of growers say current AHDB policies are of no, or marginal, benefit to their business
- 80% of growers in the horticulture and potato sectors do not want to pay a statutory levy, although 57% would be prepared to support a voluntary levy scheme if applicable to their business
- 92% of respondents want an immediate ballot on the funding of the AHDB by statutory levy
- 88% of respondents were not consulted by their representative organisations as part of the previous Defra call for views on the AHDB. This includes 74% of respondents who are members of the National Farmers Union (NFU).

In addition, the grower's ballot revealed:

- 70% of growers conduct their own research and development activity in order to remain competitive in the marketplace, something which questions the relevance of AHDB's R&D role in modern horticulture
- 89% of respondents believe that the AHDB's performance should be independently audited annually and the report published in full
- 81% believe it is wrong to discriminate against commercial growers by making them file an annual return when other farmer sectors do not have to do so

- 79% of respondents believe that the failure to file an annual return should cease to be a criminal offence
- 73% of growers think that no levy should be paid on the first £125,000 of turnover
- In this year when growers are particularly hard-pressed, 85% of respondents believe the levy should be halved for this exceptional year, with the shortfall funded from existing AHDB reserves.

Vegetable grower Peter Thorold comments: “It is clear that Defra’s survey yielded too small a sample of opinions to be valid, something which was recognised in the review’s own conclusions. Given this we wonder why AHDB Chair of Horticulture Hayley Campbell-Gibbons asserted last November that, ‘There’s been a healthy level of response, especially from growers, to the government’s open review of AHDB.’ Defra’s low level of engagement also calls into question AHDB CEO’s Jane King comment that the review provided ‘a general endorsement for the continuation of the statutory levy.’”

The majority of respondents to the Grower Ballot say they receive marginal, or no benefits from AHDB policies, and 81 per cent no longer wish to pay a statutory levy. One comment suggested that of one major horticultural association ‘agreed that current research projects through AHDB were not applicable to horticulture.’

Vegetable and potato producer John Bratley adds: “These results highlight again that the statutory levy has extracted circa £140 million from horticulture and potato growers over the last twelve years while delivering nothing in return. With margins in these sectors under such pressure, and the Government keen to forge a new future for all sectors of British farming, we look forward to discussing these findings with Defra Secretary of State George Eustice and Parliamentary Under-Secretary Victoria Prentis.”

- ENDS -

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

1. Defra’s survey received 684 responses from farmers, producers and growers. Of these 21 per cent came from the horticultural sector and 11 per cent from the potato sector. See <https://tinyurl.com/y79rd2ou> for the full breakdown.
2. The ‘AHDB Petitioners’ are flower grower Simon Redden and vegetable and potato producers Peter Thorold and John Bratley. They want to make the voices of growers heard and believe that the AHDB structure is based on an outdated system which taxes growers but is unaccountable to them. They are all based in South Lincolnshire and collectively grow potatoes, vegetables and flowers across 2,025 ha (5,000 acres) of land, and 5.6 ha (14 acres) of glasshouses; together they employ c. 250 personnel and have a combined turnover of £20 million.
3. Defra’s call for views on AHDB took place over ten weeks in 2018 and included stakeholder meetings in London, Bristol and York. The consultation was not widely advertised, most growers were unaware of its existence and levy payers were not directly contacted for their views.
4. Defra’s online survey received a mere 901 valid replies, of which just 684 were levy-paying farmers, producers and growers from all AHDB sectors. This is less than one per cent of the estimated 150,000 eligible farmers and growers.
5. Annex 1 of the final report of the call for views notes that the ‘conclusions are uncertain’, and argues that ‘it is important to keep in mind that public consultations are not necessarily

representative of the wider population' and that the responses 'cannot be assumed to relate numerically back to the number of people and organisations.'

6. Page 41 of the final report on Defra's call for views states that: *'On the option to vote on the continuation of AHDB levy every five years, the NFU and NFU Cymru did not support having a vote, whereas there was agreement across all sectors of NFU Scotland that levy payers should be able to vote.'*
7. Civica Election Services (CES) are the UK's leading provider of election services, with over 100 years' experience of administering elections, ballots and consultation processes. Every year, they work with a wide range of sectors, to engage their stakeholders and deliver secure, trusted voting projects. They work with over 75% of the UK's local authorities, with membership organisations, corporates, building societies and mutual societies, NHS bodies and trade unions.