

Food left to rot as 4,300 farm jobs went unfilled

Brexit labour shortage forces some growers to move their production overseas

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Fruit and vegetable farms across Britain were left short of thousands of migrant workers in 2017, leaving some produce to rot in the fields and farmers suffering big losses.

More than 4,300 vacancies went unfilled, according to new survey data from the National Farmers Union (NFU), which covers about half the horticultural labour market. The survey, seen exclusively by the Guardian, shows more than 99% of the seasonal workers recruited came from eastern Europe, with 0.6% from Britain.

Since the vote to leave the European Union in 2016, growers have warned repeatedly of damaging labour shortages, with recruiters reporting that Brexit has created the perception

among foreign workers that Britain is xenophobic and racist. The fall in the pound after the Brexit vote has also helped make Britain less attractive.

The government, which has promised to reduce immigration, has so far rejected calls to reinstate a seasonal agricultural workers scheme (Saws). Labour is committed to reinstating Saws. Facing uncertainty over labour, some farmers have begun moving their production overseas.

The NFU labour survey found that an average of 12.5% of vacancies went unfilled in 2017, the first time there has been a shortfall since the survey began in 2014. The proportion of workers returning to work in Britain after previous years is also dropping fast, from 41% in 2016 to 29% in 2017.

Documents released to the Guardian under freedom of information rules from the government's Saws Transition Working Group reveal that officials accepted that some farms were "struggling" as far back as July.

The group, with representatives of the government, growers and

recruiters, discussed "creative options such as pick your own and working holidays, drawing on the Australia or New Zealand models", according to a released meeting agenda from September, and considered a report that suggested cutting food waste would reduce the need for pickers.

"Growers are wondering how they are going to get through the [2018] season," said Alison Capper, chair of the NFU's horticulture board. "There is an element of desperation." Numerous farms had been forced to leave produce to rot, but did not publicise this because of fears of undermining the confidence of supermarket customers.

The worst shortfall of labour in 2017 was in the crucial harvest month of September, when 29% of vacancies were unfilled. In Capper's apple

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orchards, 100 bins of Gala eating apples went unpicked, became overripe and had to be sent for juice instead, leading to a £30,000 loss.

Minette Batters, NFU deputy president, has also said fruit and vegetables have rotted in fields and said government action was desperately needed: "This is the number one issue for growers. We don't see it as an immigration problem - it's about people that come here, are fully regulated and go home again. The Conservative party seem to have taken a very hard line approach."

Batters said the horticulture sector had been trying to expand, to provide more homegrown produce: "When we have the climatic conditions to be very successful growers of fruit and veg, it seems a sacrilege not to be making the most of that."

Neil Parish MP, chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, said: "At a time of uncertainty around our future trading relationships, we should be increasing our domestic food security rather than our reliance on imported foodstuffs."

A government spokeswoman said: "Until we have left the EU, the UK will remain a member and employers in the agricultural and food processing sectors are free to continue to recruit EU workers." The prime minister had proposed a further two-year implementation period during which registered EU citizens can work in Britain.

