

West Sussex Growers' Association (WSGA)

Executive Meeting – 7th December 2015

Report to Members – John Hall (Consultant)

1. Plan to Grow Conference – 18th November 2015

More than 120 people attended our first conference at Farbridge, West Dean on Wednesday 18th November 2015.

The key sponsors for the day were: HSBC, NFU, Chichester District Council, Langmead Group, NFU Mutual and WSGA. In addition, a number of business exhibitors also made a valuable contribution to the day, including: Bridge Greenhouses, Carpenter Box, Leader, Rubicon, Forest Heat, Re-Energise & SAE Biogas.

The Chairman for the day was Steve Oates (Economic Development Manager at CDC) and the opening speech was given by Tony Dignum (Leader of Chichester District Council).

- Session One: Economics & Planning Development; was chaired by William White (Regional Director at NFU) and included the following speakers: Martin Redfearn (Regional Agricultural Director at HSBC), Andrew Frost (Head of Planning at CDC), Gary Taylor (Chairman of AHDB-Horticulture) and Robert Searle (Finance Director at Tangmere Airfield Nurseries).
- Session Two: Water; was chaired by John Hall (WSGA & Horticultural Consultant) and included the following speakers: James Humphrys (Environment Agency Area Manager of Solent & South Downs), Jerry Knox (Associate Professor at Cranfield University) and Paul Dracott (East Malling Research).
- Session Three: Smart Technology – The Future; was chaired by Chris Moncrieff (Production Director at Vitacress) and included the following speakers: Helen Ferrier (NFU Chief Science & Regulatory Affairs Advisor), Robert Heikens (Energy 4 Growth) and Matthew Howard (Lecturer in Robotics Research at Cranfield University).

Graham Bryant (Chairman – WSGA) gave a summary of the conference in his closing remarks.

Feedback from the conference has been extremely positive and the WSGA Working Group is meeting before the Executive meeting on 7th December to consider all the comments received to date. Following this meeting, the Group will make recommendations and suggestions to the WSGA Executive as to possible future conferences.

2. WSGA Autumn Dinner – 18th November 2015

Following on from the Plan to Grow conference, 75 people attended the 89th WSGA Autumn Dinner at Farbridge, West Dean.

All the ingredients for the Dinner were sourced locally, including: Selsey crab & mackerel, Chichester rye bread, pork from Adsdean Farm, Funtington, with seasonal vegetables, autumn berries from Hall Hunter, Chichester and ice cream from Carolines Dairy at Sidlesham. Lychgate White and Pinot Noir wines were from the Bolney Estate at Bolney and the Crafted Coffee Company of Lavant provided freshly brewed coffee.

The wine from Bolney Estates was sponsored by Fargro, the table poinsettias were donated by Hill Brothers and Roger Lapin, the table magician, was sponsored by John Hall Consulting.

The venue and dinner were enjoyed by a good cross section of friends and colleagues from within West Sussex Growers' Association and the wider community. WSGA Chairman, Graham Bryant, wound up the evening with an entertaining speech.

The sweepstake raised £380 towards our newly established "WSGA Young Growers' Fund".

3. Arun District Council (ADC)

Reading Agricultural Consultants have now completed the feasibility study into the identification of possible Food Enterprise Zones within ADC. We expect a draft proposal to be published by ADC before the end of the year.

4. Biomass – Forestry Commission – Workshop – Billingshurst

A Forestry Commission meeting was held at Billingshurst on 23rd October to further discuss the logistics of supplying wood chip to commercial customers; especially to the Horticultural Industry on the West Sussex Coastal Plain.

6 x 1MW and a number of smaller biomass boilers have been installed on members' nurseries during the last 12 months. Other installations are in progress and new projects are being considered.

5. Government Autumn Statement & Budget

Amongst other things, on 25th November 2015, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the following changes:-

a) Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC)

DECC's budget will be reduced by 22% over the next four years, delivered through efficiencies in corporate services and reducing the cost of contracts.

The Department's innovation programme will, however, be doubled to £500m over the next five years, which will strengthen the future security of supply, reduce the costs of decarbonisation and boost industrial and research capabilities.

The official Autumn Statement document reads: "DECC will deliver £220m of resource savings by 2019-20 through efficiencies from pooling back office and corporate services, and reducing the costs of contracts to manage the country's historic coal and nuclear liabilities."

b) Department of the Environment, Farming & Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Day-to-day spending at DEFRA - which has responsibility for safeguarding Britain's natural environment - will fall by 15%. As part of that, the department's administration costs will be slashed by 26%.

DEFRA will have £2bn set aside to protect 300,000 homes from flooding, while £130m capital investment will go towards the department's science estates and equipment by 2020.

The document adds: "Through its ambitious efficiencies programme, DEFRA will become a more streamlined, digital department, sharing back office functions like IT, human resources and finance with its network bodies to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, and devolving roles to the local frontline to ensure effective service delivery."

c) Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI)

The RHI scheme, which provides financial incentives to suppliers of renewable heat, will see its funding rise to £1.15bn by 2021, "to ensure that the UK continues to make progress towards its climate goals."

However, this actually means that spending on the RHI scheme will be around £690m lower than what was originally forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). The UK still needs 20TWh more renewable heat by 2020, to meet the Government's 12% target.

Responding to the announcement, Renewable Energy Association (REA) chief executive Nina Skorupska said: "Our members recognised the need to make savings and presented to Treasury and DECC how we could optimise the RHI budget. A £700m cut is large, but we look forward to working with the government on reforming this crucial area."

6. National Living Wage

The following email concerning the National Living Wage was sent to our local MPs on 27th October 2015:-

West Sussex Growers' Association (WSGA) would like to draw your attention to the fact that Kent MP, Gordon Henderson, has secured a Westminster Hall debate on the effect of the living wage on our Industry at 16.00, Wednesday 28 October 2015. Please find attached a copy of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) briefing paper that addresses the concerns of the Agricultural & Horticultural Industries.

As you are already aware, WSGA members produce over £1billion of fresh produce and employ more than 7,000 people (FTE) in the Arun & Chichester Districts. Although WSGA supports the principle of the National Living Wage, we have a number of very serious concerns:-

- *The planned sudden increase in the NLW will put many jobs and businesses at risk.*

- *This dramatic wage increase will not just affect those few workers on the lowest hourly rate in our Industry, but will have a differential knock on effect right up through the pay scales.*
- *Most of our members supply fresh produce direct to retailers throughout the UK. In an already very competitive market, retailers are currently putting more and more pressure on suppliers' margins. The likelihood of farmers & growers being able to pass wage rises on to retailers and customers is therefore zero.*
- *In addition, the strong pound is already making the UK market even more attractive to our overseas competitors.*
- *In common with most other industries, there is no doubt that these combined pressures will put many jobs and businesses at risk in West Sussex.*

7. Coast to Capital Forum – Gatwick

Graham Bryant & I attended the latest C2C Forum at Gatwick on 3rd November. Many regional issues were discussed; such as transport, a second runway for Gatwick Airport and continuing problems with broadband in rural areas.

The lack of progress with improvements to the A27 was highlighted by Graham, with many of the delegates agreeing that this issue should be a C2C priority.

8. AHDB + IPPS – Visit to West Sussex

This group visited WSGA members: Hill Brothers and Freshacres on 10th November to look at and discuss recent biomass boiler installations on these nurseries.

Following the nursery visits, Fargro sponsored a seminar for about 70 delegates at the Chichester Park Hotel, to discuss various options for alternative energy systems. Ben Cross (Crosslands) and Barry Frost (Toddington) spoke about recent biomass installations on their nurseries and I spoke on behalf of WSGA about other alternative energy installations taking place in the Horticultural Industry. Jon Swain & Tom Wilkins (FEC) spoke about renewable energy options and the economics of investing in renewable energy schemes.

Fargro sponsored a very successful dinner that evening at which Raoul Curtis-Machin (HTA) welcomed everyone and Chris Beytes (Ball Publishing) gave a talk on the evolution of grower-retailer relationships in the USA.

9. NFU SE Horticultural Board meeting – Sittingbourne, Kent

Due to traffic congestion problems on the M20, I had to abandon my trip to Sittingbourne, Kent on 25th November for this Horticultural Board meeting; however, the main topics of discussion were as follows:-

- Impacts of the National Living Wage on the Horticultural Industry.
 - ✓ The NFU has commissioned Anderson Consulting to carry out some specific Case Studies to illustrate the problem.

- Business Rates being applied to Agricultural & Horticultural Businesses.
- Accommodation for temporary staff.
- The Defra 25year Growth Plan.
- Producer Organisations – Environmental Outcomes.

10. Website

The WSGA website has recently been redeveloped to provide an improved resource for members and stakeholders. Power Point Presentations from the Plan to Grow Conference and photographs of the day are now on the website. www.wsga.co.uk

11. Recent & Upcoming Events – 2015

23rd October – Forestry Commission – Biomass Workshop – Billingshurst

2nd November – WSGA Executive meeting – Aldingbourne

3rd November – Coast to Capital Forum – Gatwick

10th November – AHDB + IPPS – Visit to West Sussex + Evening Seminar & Dinner

11th November – Grow Show – Roundstone Nursery

18th November – WSGA/NFU/CDC Plan to Grow Conference – Farbridge, West Dean

18th November – WSGA Autumn Dinner – Farbridge, West Dean

25th November – NFU SE Horticultural Board meeting – Sittingbourne, Kent

7th December – WSGA – Executive meeting – Growtrain

17th December – Coastal West Sussex Partnership meeting – Shoreham

John Hall – 7th December 2015

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