

The migrant labour shortage is already here, and agri-tech can't yet fill the gap



*Crops have gone unpicked and unharvested because of a growing shortage of agricultural labour. **Richard Byrne (Harper Adams University)** explains why farming is so dependent on workers from eastern Europe and why some have already left, or chosen not to come to Britain this year. Agri-tech is not going to fill the gap immediately, and the UK needs to make agriculture a more attractive career option for Britons.*

During the referendum campaign, much of the discussion about agriculture focused on subsidies, imports and a replacement (if any) for the Common Agricultural Policy. Indeed, the only proper analysis of the impact on agricultural labour came after the referendum, with a [House of Commons Briefing paper](#) (which was largely ignored). The considered political view was that the UK would simply [produce more](#) of its own food in response to any tariffs or barriers to imports.

However, since Article 50 was triggered there has been a steady flow of industry reports and media articles about the question of labour. The Observer food critic Jay Rayner recently [drew attention](#) to the issue of fruit rotting in orchards and crops going unpicked. Like many production-focused industries, UK agriculture is heavily dependent on migrant labour and has been for years, with some 75,000 seasonal workers coming from EU countries.



Asparagus is a tricky crop to harvest. Photo: [liz west](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

The degree to which agriculture still relies upon direct labour is surprising in the 21st century, which probably goes some way to explaining why it played little part in the debates before the referendum. Government surveys from 2016 estimated that 27,000 EU nationals worked directly in agriculture and around 116,000 in the food processing sector.

When they think about UK agriculture, many – including politicians – think of the heavily mechanised cereal sector, or have rather a romantic image of the livestock sector maintained by a trusty shepherd out with his flock on the fells. Neither of these images reflect the true depth and breadth of the industry. Often overlooked (probably because they are un-subsidised) are the horticultural and fresh fruit sectors. While seen as relatively small by value (although fruit alone is worth £0.6 billion a year), they are vital to the UK's access to fresh fruit, vegetables and salad crops, and are also overwhelmingly dependent on seasonal and migrant labour – not just in picking, but the whole crop production process as well as further down the value chain in the packing and processing areas.

This labour, which comes primarily from eastern Europe, is often termed 'unskilled'. This is rather disingenuous, as picking any of these products – strawberries, raspberries and asparagus, for example – at speed, with care and choosing the ones which meets production specifications is not unskilled, and it is hard physical work.

It's not just horticulture which is vulnerable to labour loss. Much of the meat and dairy processing industry is heavily staffed by migrant workers, many of whom have been here for years and have helped these sectors grow and develop new markets. Any visit to abattoirs, meat processors and yogurt and cheese makers will again see many EU workers engaged, and increasingly employed in technical and managerial roles.

The early post-referendum loss of labour was easily explained as a result of the swift devaluation of the pound. People sending money back to their families in the rest of the EU saw a decline in the value of their earnings of around 10%. In a flexible labour market, they chose to exercise their right to move. Many of these seasonal workers are highly flexible and move around the EU with the seasons, undertaking roles as they become available. They are not tied to any particular sector or employer, but often return each year to those with good wages and conditions. For resident migrant labour, the decision about whether to stay has been heavily influenced by the political climate and the discussions about their residency status post-Brexit.

What the industry requires is a surety of labour supply. Growers generally plant to contract, and need to know they will have adequate labour to fulfill that contract without incurring penalties. Labour is now becoming more expensive as the number of applicants declines, and after some 20 years of reliance on migrant labour even higher wages are failing to attract the interest of UK citizens. A sensible solution for the seasonal labour issue would be a scheme that allowed staff to enter the UK for a period to work in a specific sector. However, this would need to be designed to reflect the flexibility of the current situation, where staff often move employer if the crop is picked early, lost or a different employer offers higher wages. This, though, does not fix the issue of the decrease in the value of the pound, so wages would have to rise with a concomitant impact on food prices.

To fix migrant seasonal labour to one employer would not be very attractive and might lead to exploitation. Indeed, there is concern within the industry and the wider retail sector that the decline in labour availability may lead to increases in the use of forced labour (modern slavery) or the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Both have already been seen, and prosecuted, on UK farms.

Replacing labour with technology is often cited as a solution. At present 'agri-tech' is still very much focused on the land cultivation and growing element of the business – mainly because labour has never been in short supply, so research into this area is limited. One of the main obstacles is the nature of many of the crops. Cereals present a uniform structure, and varieties have been bred for generations to exhibit traits to make harvesting and threshing easier. But limited investment has been made in agri-tech for soft fruits such as strawberries. Furthermore, picking any soft fruit is not a one-time operation: plants are returned to again and again over the season, and while robots may one day be able to distinguish a ripe, unblemished strawberry from a green one, the degree of investment required would be huge.

So what is the solution? Some UK growers, in the absence of a clear indication of what a future seasonal migration policy will look like – coupled with uncertainty about the shape of the future market, particularly if the UK is opened up to US imports – are looking to relocate to an EU country. Others are seeing where efficiencies can be made, considering specialisation into higher value markets or value added products. Some may mull a total change of direction.

What is clear is that the agriculture and horticulture sector urgently requires some serious consideration of the labour issue. The sector also needs to change so that it is seen as an option for UK-based labour. Mechanisation has removed a lot of the drudgery from the system: it's still hard work, but it is and can be a challenging and rewarding career with many opportunities. This is not just a Brexit Britain problem, it's a global one. In the pursuit of food security, we need not only to invest in food systems and agri-tech, but in people – so as to encourage the next generation of agri-preneurs.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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