



# 2022 Newsletter



## Chairman's Notes

*Steven Green – Johnsons of Whixley Ltd*

Seed sown, planting finished, I guess for most, we shoot ahead hopeful as ever for a busy season, or indeed seasons onward.

The government has committed to increasing tree planting rates across the UK to 30,000 hectares per year by March 2025, which equates to between 90 and 120 million trees per year, depending on planting density. Money to achieve these targets has been allocated by the HM Treasury, over £500 million in the March 2020 budget, as part of the Nature for Climate Fund tree programme.

Defra expects tree planting rates to continue to grow after 2025, contributing to the achievement of the Net Zero Strategy. After 2024-25, government will mainly deliver tree-planting through the Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs), part of Defra's wider Future Farming and Countryside Programme, its replacement for the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

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Defra is heavily dependent on private landowners opting to plant trees, but uncertainty about future government funding is putting landowners off. Planting trees and creating woodland are long-term business decisions for farmers and landowners.

The factors they need to consider include whether to forego 'premium' agricultural land for woodland creation, whether they have the knowledge and skills for woodland creation and management, their understanding and awareness of available grant schemes, and the ease of applying for the appropriate grants.

Do nurseries have the will and appetite to meet these targets? I am sure some are looking at increasing production and investing in machinery. Over the last year several new harvesting and soil sterilising machines have been developed, purchased, and put into action. Without mechanisation, are we doomed to fail with the present labour shortages.

I say fail, but do we all want to grow bigger and bigger? Not all nurseries want to invest large sums of money on machinery or new land. Many have a close-knit group of customers they wish to continue supplying with a quality product and service which returns a wage and profit for smaller on-going investment. Other nurseries with mixed production may also see different areas to spend their pound for a better return.

To move forward do we need contracts with set timetables and an understanding cancellation of stock is at a cost?

## **Brexit**

There is now the opportunity to reflect on the impact that Brexit has had on UK horticulture. There have been numerous trials and tribulations that we have gone through, challenges that we have met, opportunities that have been realised. We have made new partnerships and learned to work in new ways - become more dynamic - but the overriding sense is that Brexit has been a costly exercise for our industry.

We have taken a 'triple whammy' – costs have increased, revenue has reduced, and we have suffered a greatly slowed supply chain. The bureaucratic burden on our businesses has been huge affecting transport, compliance, our incoming goods teams, accounts departments and IT functions – all have felt the impact of Brexit. We have had to employ more people, whilst ironically Brexit has led to less people being available. Brexit has genuinely impacted every operation within our businesses.

## **Plant Health**

Whilst requiring a Phytosanitary Certificate to accompany plants coming from the EU, APHA doesn't give the Phytosanitary Certificate any authority. To give but one example, plants due to be collected in Belgium, which were exhibiting symptoms of a suspected disease, were held there until the plants could be tested. The plants were passed as fit to travel and issued a Phytosanitary Certificate. On arrival in the UK, the plants were inspected by UK Plant Health and seen to be exhibiting symptoms of a suspected disease, but despite having a certificate confirming a negative result, and a Phytosanitary Certificate issued by the Belgium plant health authorities, APHA sent the plants for testing. The plants were quarantined until the negative result came back.

What is the point of the time taken and the cost borne (by UK businesses) of testing and issuing a Phytosanitary Certificate in the EU?

A robust stance is critical in pest and disease control matters, and UK horticulture should be pleased that this is the approach APHA is taking. But if we are not going to put any credence on the inspections and testing done in the EU then let's not ask for it to be done, and let's not pay for it. It is the single biggest barrier to the industry in terms of both timescale and cost, and as already stated, this is money being spent in the EU, not the UK – this is a double hit – expense to UK businesses that could be reinvested in production to help the UK meet its environmental goals.

We should continue with the inspections and testing by APHA in the UK, but instead of insisting on the issuing of a Phytosanitary Certificate in the EU, we should recognise the EU processes and Plant Passporting regimes - the same ones we ourselves were part of in 2020, this would be a massive move in terms of mitigating UK businesses' exposure to cost. The cash freed up would allow a focus on investing in our businesses, helping to achieve the Government's aims of a stronger, more UK-sufficient horticultural supply chain.

# HTA Tree and Hedging Group AGM (20-21 June 2022 - Elgin)

*Ed Holmes, J & A Growers Ltd and Vice Chair of the T&HG*

This year's AGM was held in Elgin in the north of Scotland, following the kind invitation of Ronald and Neal Christie (Christies Fochabers) to join in their celebrations for the company's 202-year anniversary. There had been a forced delay in hosting the occasion since 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, but individuals from the nursery and forestry industries travelled the length of the UK to help mark it.

On Monday morning, the sun was shining over the Moray Firth as members of the HTA Tree and Hedging Group, CONFOR Nursery Producers Group and public sector delegates arrived at the Maelor Forest Nurseries site in Scotland for a nursery tour. The visit gave a fabulous insight into how they have set up this new nursery site and a chance to view the huge cold store, some cutting edge transplanting machines and fields of transplanted Sitka spruce by the million. There were envious discussions about how they had managed to get the nursery so weed free, full credit to them.

The crowd of people then travelled back down into Elgin for the summer meeting and relevant AGM's. There was no shortage of content, with country updates and various presentations covering the current concerns within the industry, such as labour availability and mechanisation developments. The enthusiasm for such a meeting continued right through to the end of the day as Alistair Yeomans filled the last slot of the afternoon with a detailed update of the Plant Healthy Certification Scheme. The Tree and Hedging group AGM then followed.



*The group inspect the production beds at Maelor Forest Nurseries*



*A practical demonstration of the PlantTape machine*

The evening entertainment was organised by Ronald Christie who gave some very clear instructions, 'to get onto the coach outside the hotel at 6.15pm'. We arrived at Arradoul Farm where the Christies fleet of lorries and vans were lined along one avenue and a row of tractors and machinery were parked as far as the eye could see down another. There was no doubt the event was going to be something special as we passed along a red carpet and into the newly decorated cold store which would have been fit for any wedding reception. Fine food and non-stop entertainment followed. What an event, it shall be remembered for years to come.

Tuesday morning took us back to Christies Fochabers Tulloch Farm to see their steam sterilising machine in action, the conifer broadcast seedbeds, and some lining-out of hardwoods from the cold store. We also got to see the PlantTape automated transplanting machine in action and this was super impressive. With a capability of transplanting around a million trees per day, it was a real eye opener and showed us how technology is stepping up to meet the labour shortage challenge we are all now facing in our businesses. The morning finished back at Arradoul Farm to see Ronald and Neal's new grading system which they have built over the past couple of years using a firm of local engineers and fabricators. It is still work in progress, but it shows a massive commitment with them embracing new technology to increase output and improve the working environment for employees.

The future won't be without its' new challenges, but there looks to be some exciting times ahead for our industry.

## Tree Production Innovation Fund and Tree Production Capital Grant

*Noemi Keresztes, Project Officer - Forest Nurseries and Innovation Grants, Forestry Commission*

Nurseries are central to the Government's campaign to increase the rate of woodland creation, which is a key part of the Net Zero Strategy. This push for more woodland in England comes under the umbrella of the £766m Nature for Climate Fund, jointly delivered by Defra and the Forestry Commission, and it is within this fund and through the Sector Capacity Project that we have developed support for research and innovation in the sector via the Tree Production Innovation Fund and a much-needed injection of capital through the Tree Production Capital Grant. Jack Clough, Grant Manager – well known for his Scottish Country Dancing ability – and the team in which I work, as Project Officer administer these grants.

### **Tree Production Innovation Fund**

In Spring 2022, the Forestry Commission re-opened the Tree Production Innovation Fund (TPIF). Initially launched in October 2021, the TPIF was designed to support innovation projects that will enhance the quantity, quality, and diversity of tree stock available for planting in England. Through the fund, applicants are encouraged to develop innovative technologies and ways of working to overcome current barriers to tree production, addressing one or more of the three [TPIF Challenges](#).

This year, applicants were invited to submit multi-year proposals spanning up to three financial years, ending in March 2025. Projects could be valued at up to £300K per year, enabling applicants to develop ambitious, long-term projects with high impacts. Through the TPIF, the Forestry Commission will be supporting a range of projects with outputs that will better equip nurseries to supply the trees required for new woodland and urban planting projects. A full list of this year's TPIF project descriptions will be announced shortly via Forestry Commission channels. Applications include collaborations between researchers, nurseries, seed suppliers and the industry, in addition to projects focusing closely on automation. Successful applicants to this round of the TPIF include RBG Kew and SilviBio Ltd.



*Intelligent Growth Solutions vertical farming technology systems*

## Successful projects from the previous round of funding include:

- Intelligent Growth Solutions Ltd: A collaboration between Intelligent Growth Solutions Ltd and Maelor Forest Nurseries investigating the feasibility and optimisation of Total Controlled Environment Agriculture systems to produce year-round forestry seedlings.
- RBG Kew: A collaboration between RBG Kew, Forestart and Elsoms Seeds seeking to enhance understanding of tree seed traits and their use in the screening, pre-treatment, and germination of native tree seed.
- SAF Woodland Management: A collaboration between SAF Woodland Management and Fera Science Ltd to produce a microbially rich, scientifically evaluated growing medium, inspired by the increasing understanding of the crucial role played by beneficial microbial associations for optimal plant health and resilience.

## Tree Production Capital Grant

The Forestry Commission has also recently launched a new capital grant to support nursery production. The Tree Production Capital Grant (TPCG) has been developed to support seed and sapling suppliers of all sizes, including established and smaller nurseries, and new entrants looking to diversify into the sector. The grant will enable suppliers to bolster production at pace and has been designed to complement the innovation outputs of the Tree Production Innovation Fund.

Between August 2022 and March 2025, up to £8.8m in capital grant funding will be made available through the TPCG. The scheme provides 50% funding for projects up to a maximum grant of £175,000, enabling support for significant investments in expansion and automation, in addition to mechanisation of facilities and equipment. Through the TPCG, domestic nurseries and seed suppliers will be able to boost capacity and make improvements to the quality, diversity, and biosecurity of planting material.

The grant closed for applications on 4 July 2022 and has been very popular, with the Forestry Commission receiving an incredible 58 applications from nurseries across the country. Projects will be evaluated at the end of July with applicants being informed of the outcome in August.

## Defra 'Automation in Horticulture Review'

*Summary by Wayne Brough, HTA Technical Horticulture Manager*

The new Defra review identified six key 'clusters of technologies' that could help accelerate the adoption and development of automation in horticulture. They included: optimised production systems, packhouse automation, field rigs and mechanical systems, autonomous selective harvesting, augmented work and autonomous crop protection, monitoring and forecasting.

A number of recommendations were put forward around three key themes of 'mind the gap', 'collaboration' and 'technology alone is not a solution', with suggested actions to help create an enabling environment to increase the adoption of automation technologies by the horticulture sector and accelerate the technology development pipeline.



*Autonomous crop protection – the Thorvald-Saga Robotics UV application machine*

## **Mind the gap**

The need for a secure source of labour in the period before mass-adoption of automation technology is important.

Recommendation 1: Defra should consider pursuing a long-term Seasonal Workers Scheme for edible and ornamental horticulture starting in 2022.

## **Collaboration**

The need for co-operative leadership and engagement between the UK government, industry, and academia to increase the mass adoption of automation and accelerate technology in the development pipeline.

Recommendation 2: Defra should consider convening a consortium that brings together UK government departments, horticulture industry and technology companies to drive significant adoption of available and proven technologies by growers.

Recommendation 3: Defra should consider launching a robotic crop harvester mission to fast-track innovative research and development of systems.

## **Technology alone is not a solution**

There is a need to provide the necessary infrastructure, funding, guidance and regulations to support this sectoral revolution.

Recommendation 4: Defra should consider leading a review of financial and fiscal support for automation in horticulture.

Recommendation 5: The sector should identify, develop, and share automation infrastructure best practice among growers to help them transition from labour-intensive to technology-intensive operations.

Recommendation 6: The sector should develop its future skills pipelines and consider ways to attract and retain skilled staff.

Recommendation 7: The sector should seek greater representation for horticulture and technology supply chain delegates at regulatory-legislative working groups on next generation robotics.

To read the full review, [please click here](#).

## **The harvester of the future?**

*Jamie Dewhurst, J & A Growers Ltd*

We as an industry are now experiencing climatic extremes, including wetter winters and drier summers. In the harvesting months from October to February inclusive, during 19/20, rainfall on site was 444mm and in 20/21 was 359mm, this is against a 20-year average of 267mm. It is now more important than ever that when conditions are favourable, we optimise our harvesting capacity so we can get more plants out the ground than we are used to, all this at a time when sourcing labour is becoming a real challenge.

For a number of years, we have been looking for a company who would build a bespoke self-propelled five row harvester for us. Most people are aware that two attempts have been made, one in Germany and one in The Netherlands, both are still work in progress. In the spring of 2019 contact was made with a company based in South Yorkshire, Jones Engineering, who major on vegetable machinery manufacturing.

After several visits to see our systems in operation, we were heartened to get a positive response that they felt our dream could be a reality.

Over the next 18 months and numerous design phases, (it took longer to design than build!) we had an agreed design in place.

Construction started at the beginning of 2021, and despite the headaches that Covid brought to the table, delivery took place on 3 May 2022.

Now the real work began, would it work? Ask Steve Jones, the owner of Jones Engineering, that question and his response is “we don’t do it doesn’t work”.

The first barrier was would it fit into our sheds, only after the flashing light on the roof was removed! It measures 9.5m in length and 4m in height in transport mode. In operation the cab rises to 5m.



*The new five row harvester safely in the shed at J & A Growers*

We deliberately left some stock in the ground last winter for trials. I am now writing this in mid-June, its 30°C outside and the answer to the original question is, yes it does work! Of course, there are still things to be adapted, changed and re-programmed, but fundamentally it works.

By the time you read this we are confident that it will be fully operational and ready for next winter.

J & A Growers Ltd are extremely grateful for the financial assistance made towards the project that was received under the Scottish Governments Harvesting and Processing Grant.

## **Importing plants and the proposed ‘Target Operating Model’ for 2023**

*Sally Cullimore, HTA Technical Policy Manager*

The HTA Policy Team have been hard at work in workshops and discussions with the Government about how the proposed ‘re-think’ of the border control arrangements announced in April might work better for GB-based importers of plants. The proposals, entitled the Target Operating Model (or TOM), will be published in the autumn by the Cabinet Office, and implemented by the end of 2023, with a longer-term view of the border included within. Defra have been tasked with collaborating and co-designing with industry a better way of getting Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) goods across the border while maintaining the biosecurity of GB. SPS goods include food, live animals, cut flowers, fresh produce and of course, plants.

The majority of plants are placed in the highest risk category for importing – from all around the world including Europe – so will still face the highest level of control. What we have been tasked with working on is not just ensuring that Border Control Posts are cost effective and streamlined for businesses when they come online sometime next year (date to be confirmed but looking likely later rather than earlier in the year), but also that importers will have access to a Trusted Trader (TT) scheme.

A TT scheme involving plants may mean a business becomes authorised by Defra and APHA to conduct its own plant health inspections on imported plants, cut flowers and fresh produce while under robust auditing procedures. Part of that proposal is the potential for staff to be trained to Plant Health and Seeds Inspector standard, in order to conduct inspections while making use of existing certification schemes to ease the auditing process required to be authorised as a TT. This is a major step forward for the Government and a departure from earlier policy positions, with the potential to reduce costs for importers and enhance the biosecurity of Great Britain if designed and implemented correctly.

We should know more about all aspects of the TOM and associated TT schemes when it is published in late September/early October, so watch this space. If there are any comments or questions, then please email the HTA Policy Team at [policy@hta.org.uk](mailto:policy@hta.org.uk)

## News and event round-up

### *Seasonal labour availability*

Pro-force are reporting good levels of capacity to support the industry, having had minimal enquiries for labour. Contact James Mallick, Compliance and Implementation Director; mobile: 07808 871236 and e-mail: [JamesMallick@pro-force.co.uk](mailto:JamesMallick@pro-force.co.uk) for more information. Other providers are also available.

### *New HTA Nursery Advice Line*

Just a reminder that the HTA Nursery Advice Line has now been transferred from Dove Associates to Zest-ICM (Selchuk Kurtev). The current contact details for the line are still valid: phone number - [0333 005 0167](tel:03330050167) and e-mail address - [nurseryproduction@hta.org.uk](mailto:nurseryproduction@hta.org.uk)

### *HTA Grower Technical Workshop - Non-chemical weed control in field-grown crops*

This HTA event was organised by Zest-ICM and staged at J & A Growers on 24 August. The event attracted over 40 growers and consisted of presentations and machinery demonstrations. Current and potential technologies of non-chemical weed control including those based on vision-guided cultivators and weeders, electricity, thermal (steam, hot foam, flame and laser) and pressurised water were discussed, and several demonstrated, including the fully autonomous platform from Agrointelli.

Further technical workshops are planned through the autumn and next spring.



*Agointelli Robotti autonomous platform which can be linked to various pieces of cultivation equipment*

### *Upcoming Tree and Hedging Group events*

After the success of this year's joint AGM with the CONFOR Nursery Producers Group, it has been agreed that the 2023 AGM will be another joint one. The event will also include a mechanisation show, building on the non-chemical weed control event undertaken last month; a small working group has been formed to agree the objectives, content, location, and funding options for the event. Watch this space for more detail through the winter and spring.