

Media Release



NPA press release

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NPA seeks Government action to avert pig sector labour crisis

The pig sector is edging closer to a major crisis as staff shortages hit pork production, causing backlogs on farms and gaps on supermarket shelves, the NPA has warned.

The association, which is seeking urgent action from Government, has learned that major pork processors are cutting throughput, some by up to 25%, meaning producers are once again having to keep pigs on farm for longer than would usually be the case.

The shortage is being driven by a combination of the new stricter rules on EU workers coming to the UK, furlough, the expansion of jobs in other sectors and the ‘pingdemic’ that has resulted in more than 600,000 people per week being told to isolate by the NHS Test and Trace app.

Labour shortages are being felt across the entire pig sector, including on farms. Pork processing plants have been reporting absenteeism of 10-16% even before COVID-related absences, which the British Meat Processors Association (BMPA) said is now accounting for, in some cases, a further 5-10% of staff that are self-isolating.

NPA chief executive Zoe Davies said: “In some plants, it is reaching critical stage, with production being cut by a quarter and pigs being ‘rolled’ into the following week, meaning backlogs are starting to build on farms.

“We are hearing that this is not just a short-term issue resulting from COVID self-isolation. EU staff have gone home and are not coming back or have gone to find alternative employment.

“If this continues, it will only be a matter of weeks before we see serious problems on farms. This is the last thing our members need as they are only just getting over the last backlog, which saw more than 100,000 pigs backed up on farm, and are currently coping with record feed costs, so are already struggling to find funds to keep feeding pigs.

“The frustration is that demand for British pork is currently strong, but pork plants are struggling to meet it because they do not have enough people to do the work.

“This will lead to empty retail shelves, which is likely to result in more imports at a time when consumers are seeking great British pork more than ever before.”

The Government has promised that key workers from certain sectors will not have to self-isolate after close contact with positive cases, but the industry is still waiting for a definitive list.

The NPA, along with other industry bodies has been pressing the Government to take steps to alleviate the shortages, but so far these calls have fallen on deaf ears. “The Government is aware of the severity of the problem but appears unwilling to act,” Dr Davies said.

The NPA is now encouraging its members to write to their MPs asking for ‘urgent intervention and action to help tackle the unique set of challenges that we face’.

MPs will be asked to put pressure on Ministers for support in several areas:

- Call for processing and pig farm staff who have been double vaccinated to be allowed to take a daily test and avoid self-isolation as long as the test proves negative.
- Providing businesses access to EU seasonal workers from the EU as allowed in the horticulture, fruit and poultry sectors. A temporary relaxation of visa rules for specific roles to allow more foreign labour into the UK would help.
- The Home Office to add meat processing workers and butchers to the Shortage Occupation List.
- A sensible analysis by the Treasury to determine which of the approximately 1.5 million furloughed workers may be suitable for employment in the food sector, and then helping them get back work as soon as possible.
- A compensation package from Defra for those in the industry most heavily impacted by this on-going crisis, similar to what has already been delivered by other devolved administrations.

“As a sector we do and will always try to find solutions ourselves, but yet again, due to an accumulation of issues, this is out of our control. The entire pig sector is very close to crisis point and we need urgent and clear action from Government to address this crippling labour shortage,” Dr Davies added.

Notes to editors

- More than 100,000 pigs were backed up on farm in the early months of this year due to a ‘perfect storm’ of events, including Brexit restrictions on exports, pork plant closures due to COVID-19 and the suspension of exports to China from some plants.
- Pig backlogs result in higher feeds prices and overweight penalties for producers, plus major logistical difficulties and potential welfare issues.

More information

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