

UK labour shortage prompts appeal to Polish workers

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A shortage of labour on farms is beginning to impact upon UK agriculture.

Once the bulwark of the specialist fruit and vegetable sector, a scarcity of workers from eastern Europe is being felt right across the industry and an agency - Central European Staffing - is advertising for agricultural labour in Polish publications.

A spokesman for the Polish embassy in London commented: "There are around 120,000 Polish workers employed in the UK but it is very difficult to say how many are involved with agriculture. However, it will be a considerable number."

Agnes Wrodarczyk, of Kent based Central European Staffing, added: "To date we have placed around 300 workers from Poland on farms, but the figure is rising and we are receiving at least 20 applications each week."

With Poland becoming a member of the European Union in May 2004 there are now no issues regarding work permits. All a worker is required to do is to register with the Home Office under the work regulation scheme and apply for a national insurance number.

Relatively few full-time Polish workers are currently employed on farms in Scotland. However, Scottish abattoirs are increasingly reliant on Polish workers.

In contrast, the picture is different in parts of England.

Dairy farmers there are finding it difficult to attract herdsmen and a significant number of immigrant workers is now employed in that capacity.

Wrodarczyk commented:

"We are getting good reports, which does not come as a surprise because we check out references very thoroughly and many have some form of formal qualification from trade schools."

Wages on UK farms appear highly attractive to Poles who can expect to receive only £200 to £300 per month in their home country. A fair proportion of the Polish workers are former farmers in who have found it impossible to remain in business following admission to the EU.

Their small farms are increasingly being swallowed up into larger areas with a substantial number of investors moving in from western Europe.

Wrodarczyk explained: "It is proving very difficult for small Polish farmers to survive in the EU and to meet all the regulations associated with the Common Agricultural Policy.

Basically, they are just going bankrupt. The current rate of unemployment in Poland is 18per cent, but it is much, much higher in many rural areas."

Meanwhile, the full-time labour force on Scottish farms continues to decline.

A decade ago there were 11,700 full-time male employees with 710 females. Today there are some 8000 males and 700 females.

DAN BUGLASS