

Beet growers want sweeter deal for key crop

Beet growers in North Norfolk were in determined mood to secure a sweeter deal for the county's cornerstone crop at the club's November meeting.

Michael Sly, chairman of NFU Sugar, told about 50 members and guests at Holt & District Farmers' Club, that the overwhelming majority of growers had pledged support to the growers' negotiating team.

Fenland grower Mr Sly, who farms at Thorney and is also chairman of the English Mustard Growers, said that surging global demand for sugar and high world prices supported the industry's case. And given the depressed returns in three of the past five campaigns, growers needed to earn a reasonable return.

He said that 1,100 growers had also pledged support for NFU Sugar, which probably represented two-thirds of the sugar beet crop area. Mr Sly said that British Sugar had to recognise growers' concerns, which were not just about the price.

North Norfolk farmer Andrew Ross, who heads beet reception team on NFU Sugar, stressed that there were ample supplies of quality seed available contrary to some industry claims. Growers should not rush to sign contracts because of concerns about possible shortages of beet seed, he said.

Further, Mr Sly reminded growers, who might have already signed contracts with British Sugar, that there was in-effect a 14-day "cooling off" period. Maybe, they should check, and possibly take legal advice, regarding the small print in these contracts.

He also urged growers to contact their MPs as soon as possible to express their concerns.

He stressed that NFU Sugar, which represented all growers, was the legally constituted body with the monopoly processor, British Sugar. It was all in the interests of all growers, he said, to maintain a united front. As such, it has now asked Defra to intervene and to seek to achieve a settlement of the increasingly-bitter dispute with the processor.

Two grower meetings have been arranged by NFU Sugar. All beet growers welcome.

Wednesday, November 29 – Newmarket racecourse, 7pm.

Thursday, November 30 – Lincolnshire showground, 7pm.

Mustard highlights

Since 2007 when there were just 11 growers of mustard, prospects for the crop have been transformed. As chairman of English Mustard Growers, he said that next season there will be almost 40 growers including one in Kent and another in north

Lincolnshire. Several growers from the crop's traditional Norfolk heartland have also joined the fold.

Mr Sly was interviewed for BBC Radio 4's Farming Today by Anna Hill on Friday, November 17 (the report at 5.50am will be available for the next 30 days on BBC Sounds). He said that English mustard was even being exported to north America. Since the £11m investment in only the world's third double superfine mustard mill at Easton, the business, Condimentum, two-thirds owned by farmers, has seen sales rise sharply. Hence, the need to recruit more growers, he said.

By 2007 the home-grown industry faced a crossroads. Growers responded to a combination of low returns and poor quality seed by investing in a long-term relationship with specialist seed breeders, Elsoms, of Splading. As a result new varieties had been developed including higher-yielding autumn sown white mustard variety. Supplying the long-established Colman's brand was key but Condimentum was looking further afield into supplying food service and export markets.

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