

Seasonal workers in Scottish agriculture



The Challenge

Scotland's agricultural sector relies heavily on seasonal non-UK workers, particularly from central and eastern Europe, to meet labour demands. However, there is a lack of detailed information about the actual numbers of migrant workers working in Scotland and their living and working conditions. Given the vital role this workforce plays in Scottish agriculture, and the myriad uncertainties following the Brexit vote, this project aimed to better understand the numbers, origins and importance of these workers.

Policy Implication

Evidence collected in the study demonstrates the importance of seasonal workers from overseas to Scottish agriculture. Two thirds of farm businesses stated that they were likely to switch to other agricultural activities without access to their migrant workforce, and over half said they would likely diversify their business into non-agricultural activities.

Brexit has undoubtedly affected the confidence of a proportion of workers and therefore their expectations about returning to Scotland in 2018.

Approximately 40% of the surveyed workers were certain they would be returning to Scotland in 2018, with 12% unlikely to return due to having permanent jobs to go to in their home countries, or returning to studies, etc. and 46% were uncertain about whether they would return in 2018.

Research

Following a review of extant literature, several rounds of surveys were held with farm businesses, labour providers and workers. These were followed by on-farm group interviews and focus groups with workers. A multiple regression analysis was also used to estimate the number of seasonal workers.

Results

The study conservatively estimates that there were 9,255 seasonal migrant workers in Scottish agriculture during 2017. About 25% of these work on more than one farm in the UK and there is also transition to other sectors of work, in particular food processing and hospitality. On average, seasonal migrant workers were employed for just over four months per year, corresponding to the key soft fruit harvesting period, but the seasonal pattern of crops in Scotland provided an opportunity for extended periods of employment. For non-UK seasonal workers, the key motivation for working on Scottish farms were earnings potential linked to enhanced quality of life and goals, conditions of work relative to their home countries and familiarity, recommendations and farm reputations.

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Funding

Scottish Government's Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services Division (RESAS)

Scottish Funding Council supported Universities Innovation Fund



Contact

Contact: Steven Thomson

Email: steven.thomson@sruc.ac.uk

Research group: Land Economy, Environment and Society

Address: SRUC, Peter Wilson Building, Edinburgh, EH9 3JG.

About

The Land Economy, Environment and Society (LEES) Research Group is one of the largest groupings of economists and social scientists working in the rural, agricultural and land based sectors in the UK. Our vision is to be recognised as one of the leading centres for agricultural and wider rural economic and social research globally, benefiting the land use sector, the environment and rural communities.

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