

The U.K. pea industry is under threat of becoming uneconomical for farmers due to the risk of losing three active chemical ingredients used on crops to control weeds, pests and disease. 

That is the joint assertion from the British vining pea sector which is starting a campaign to voice concerns over a European Commission review and possible increased regulation of some of the active ingredients used in agriculture.

Pendimethalin, flumioxazin and bentazon are 'under threat' of being removed from an approved list of products used in crop treatment, according to the U.K. pea sector.

Companies, growers and organizations, including the British Growers Association, Processors & Growers Research Organisation (PGRO) and the Vegetable Agronomists Association (VAA), have joined forces to oppose the potential loss, which they claim could have a devastating impact on the industry as a whole.

Richard Fitzpatrick, managing director of major British pea producer Holbeach Marsh Co-operative Ltd (HMC Peas) and chairman of the VAA, spoke with www.freshfruitportal.com about his concerns for the future of the industry in Britain.

"Europe drew up these lists a year or so back now and it's a case of our industry and our organizations highlighting the concerns and to get some lobbying going before it is too late," Fitzpatrick said.

"Our industry wanted to speak out rather than go sleepwalking in to it and in two years time all of these products are gone and we find out that we can't grow peas any more.

"They (the active ingredients) are under threat of review because of a new system designed in Europe. This is a European move and they're looking to class chemicals as hazards rather than risks. This is extremely serious and could be a major blow for us."

Fitzpatrick said the U.K. grew around 130,000 metric tons (MT) of green peas annually with an ex-farm value of £50 million (US\$78.3 million). Frozen peas are extremely popular in the British market and are one of the country's top selling vegetables, he said.

"We grow excellent quality peas and any increasing regulation or withdrawal of using this technology will make it harder to do that and could quite possibly severely affect the industry and make growing peas unviable for producers who will look to grow alternative crops.

"Then where will we be? Importing peas, produce we can grow ourselves, at inferior quality. Although we can import products from other countries we can't import the quality products that we produce here. And we want to get away from importing produce and avoid creating big food miles.

"Don't we all want to make farming more local and sustainable?"

The ripple affect on jobs

The U.K. is home to several key frozen pea processing plants employing hundreds of workers. Birds Eye for instance is one of the leading brands in the frozen food industry sector.

Fitzpatrick warned that jobs could be at risk if the industry was damaged by a 'decision based in disconnected Europe'.

"All of these freezing plants like Birds Eye, a plant in Dundee in Scotland, and others rely heavily on that two month period of producing thousands of [metric] tons of peas. We are talking about a lot of jobs in this sector that could be affected if growers turn away from producing peas in the U.K. because it has become unviable to do so."

"We need to compete on a global scale and to be efficient, not to go backwards, increase costs and reduce competitiveness."

Exploring cultural methods for weed, pest control and disease resistance

HMC Peas has been experimenting this year with alternative cultural methods for weed suppression and breeding programs for disease resistant varieties.

"There is a big push on exploring cultural methods, not just in the pea sector but in British agricultural in general. There is lots of work going on to find out how to control weeds, pests and disease but this is not going to happen over the two years it could take for Europe to make its decision.

"Although we're looking at all these methods, if we loose these chemicals over the next two years then we are in trouble because the vining pea industry has so few products now to choose from.

"I've been working in the industry for 15 years and in that time the products have reduced by around 60 to 70% and we are left with very few things to try and help us produce a

quality crop."

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