

Written evidence submitted by the Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (LS0079)

About the Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (RABDF)

The Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (RABDF) is the only UK charity focused on practical dairy farming, helping to create a profitable and sustainable sector.

Labour on dairy farms is something the RABDF is passionate about, working hard to understand the challenges and identify possible solutions to the labour challenges. Since 2014 it has conducted four surveys and submitted various reports to the Government highlighting the labour challenges.

Labour on UK Dairy Farms Update - January 2022

The RABDF last submitted a report in October 2021, highlighting the lack of skilled labour in the dairy industry. The situation within the sector remains, with farmers adapting their ways of working to overcome the issue. The RABDF believe many of the changes being made on farms are unsustainable.

Impact on milk production

For example, the labour shortage is having an impact on milk production. Milk deliveries to processors are declining weekly as many farmers have dropped their milk output due to a lack of labour.

Figures from the AHDB highlight the continual decline in milk volume, with GB milk deliveries falling 0.2% week on week at the start of January 2022. Compared to the same weeks in 2021, the average daily milk production is down 2.3%, an equivalent of 0.79m litres of milk a day¹.

Health and safety risks

Unlike other livestock sectors such as pig and poultry, where these farms tend to be run by larger integrated businesses linked to a processor, many dairy farms are still family-run businesses. As a result, family members work longer hours (often over 80 hours a week) to cover staff vacancies.

Feedback from farmers

To grasp the situation on the ground, the RABDF interviewed a handful of farmers in January 2022 to gauge their concern over the labour situation. Here is a summary of the findings.

- One farmer who supplied M&S said out of 32 farms in their producer group, there were 100 job vacancies, with farmers struggling to recruit adequate skilled labour.
- Two producers had dropped from milking three times a day to twice a day due to a lack of labour. Both farmers struggled to recruit labour willing to work outside the regular 9-5 hours, with the evening (8.30 pm) milking a sticking point.
- One farm had been employing foreign labour for more than 15 years. Now, all five foreign workers have returned home. The main reason, Covid-19.
- In all cases, the farms had to recruit multiple part-time workers to cover staffing requirements, all still having vacancies. This resulted in an additional manager being employed on one farm to oversee part-time workers.

Tackling the labour crisis: What can the dairy industry do differently?

Tackling the labour crisis must be a priority. Over the coming weeks, the RABDF plan to set up a cross-industry steering group to address the issue. This group will consider:

1. **Improving the marketing of farm jobs.** Progressive, rewarding and well-paid careers do exist on many farms.
2. **Engaging with external parties to help with recruitment.** For example, approximately 2400 people apply for 1200 places to study veterinary science in the UK every year². Students not gaining a position may be suitable for dairy technician work, with many parallels between veterinary and dairy work. These include husbandry, nutrition, and the understanding of animal physiology.

Conclusion

Action needs to happen in the dairy sector to prevent further milk volume declines and safeguard the existing workforce.

The RABDF hopes the cross-industry steering group will map some short-, medium- and long-term solutions to improve the labour issue on dairy farms and the broader agricultural sector.

References

1. <https://ahdb.org.uk/dairy/uk-daily-milk-deliveries>
2. https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/vsc_admissions_guide_2022.pdf