

Environment Secretary commits to sustainable horticulture growth

Plans to boost home grown fruit and vegetable production and drive the growth of high-tech horticulture have been set out today by Environment Secretary Ranil Jayawardena, as part of HM Government's work to unleash the potential of British farming.

Glasshouse growing, a form of Controlled Environment Horticulture, has multiple economic, food security and sustainability benefits, but the sector currently represents only 10% of English horticultural businesses. It means the United Kingdom only grows 25% of the cucumbers and 17% of the tomatoes supplied domestically, however businesses operating with this model are already reaping benefits – from extended growing seasons, efficient water usage and higher yields per square metre.

To kickstart efforts to grow the horticulture sector and boost domestic production, the Environment Secretary today committed a further £12.5m investment in automation and robotics through the Farming Innovation Programme on top of more than £70 million spent so far on industry-led research and development.

The fund opens in January with 'UK Research and Innovation' (UKRI) and will match-fund projects that will drive economic growth, food security and deliver on environmental commitments. Previous funded projects have included fruit scouting robots, automated vegetable harvesters and new types of fertiliser.

Environment Secretary Ranil Jayawardena said:

We all rely on farmers and growers every day to produce high-quality food, and to look after our environment.

Whilst we have a high degree of food security, we can boost it further. We can increase home-grown fruit and vegetable production, which is why I am bringing in expert advice and match-funding robotics and automation projects.

Technology offers huge opportunities to make farming greener and more productive, so we should harness it to help grow the economy, create jobs and improve food security too.

Last week, the Environment Secretary visited the Netherlands to learn more about high-tech greenhouse and vertical growing approaches, touring a

robotics institute and a glasshouse business which uses artificial intelligence, robotics, renewable energy and water neutral systems to grow produce.

He also announced he will appoint an industry expert to work with him and colleagues across the edible and ornamental sectors to build a clearer picture of the barriers and opportunities in Controlled Environment Horticulture. They will provide a set of recommendations and policy interventions that the government can implement both immediately and longer term.

Furthermore, the Environment Secretary has written to a number of major Controlled Environment Horticulture growers to seek the industry's views on how HM Government can best support its expansion and ensure government policies best reflect industry needs.

To create a positive investment environment for the horticulture sector, HM Government has [already signalled](#) its commitment to including industrial horticulture in decisions on industrial energy policy and reviewing the planning permission process to support new developments. Plans to incentivise the sector to make use of surplus heat and CO2 from industrial processes, and renewable sources of energy are also being considered.

As set out in the Growth Plan, HM Government will be looking at the frameworks for regulation, innovation and investment that impact farmers and land managers to make sure that policies are best placed to both boost food production and protect the environment. Later this year, the Environment Secretary will put forward details of plans on how we will increase food security whilst strengthening the resilience and role of farmers as stewards of the British countryside.

- Defra will announce the individual appointed as the Secretary of State's industry expert on Controlled Environment Horticulture later this year.