

“ We would be giving away control of our seed potato classification scheme regulations. ”

Brexit impacts seed supplies

Roots
Potato seed

A ban on both importing and exporting seed potatoes between the EU and Great Britain is impacting availability of some key varieties and could potentially effect innovation in the longer term. CPM takes a look at the situation and what it means for growers.

By Mike Abram

The door firmly closed on British-grown seed potato exports to the EU on 31 December 2020, but a six-month derogation was put in place to cover the current season. But now the trade route is similarly shut to British ware growers who would normally source EU-produced seed potatoes.

Both are a casualty of the Brexit agreement. Britain is now classified under EU trade rules as a “third country”. Under European Commission rules, “sensitive products”, which potato seed falls under, require separate technical listing for trade to be allowed — essentially meaning the Commission recognises Great Britain’s regulatory, supervisory and enforcement regimes as being equivalent to its own.

But that’s not happened as yet, despite industry lobbying on both sides of the

channel and Defra pressing the EU to reconsider its position, with the EU maintaining that dynamic alignment with EU regulation is necessary to progress this.

Dynamic rules alignment, however, is politically challenging for the UK government as it means the UK following all regulations set in the EU, suggests Sandy McGowan, British Potato Trade Association president and manager of Cygnet PEP, which is the leading exporter of Scottish seed potatoes.

Giving away control

“We would no longer have a representative on any of the committees that decides on these standards,” he explains. “Essentially we would be giving away control of our seed potato classification scheme regulations.

“If, for example, a decision was made to reduce tolerance for common scab, we would be powerless to stop it, and technically then breaking the law to then certify any of our seed potatoes to our own certification scheme standards.”

The relatively small financial size of the sector is another barrier to creating the political imperative to overcoming the impasse, suggests Richard Baker, director of the UK arm of Dutch seed potato house HZPC.

“The concern is our irrelevancy. A 20,000t market at approximately £400/t is about £8M in turnover. It’s structurally important to our industry but these are not figures that politicians are interested in, or

enough to generate an impetus to do something,” he fears.

“And from the EU side the loss of the British export market isn’t a big issue. We take in less than 0.67% of the EU seed production, which is manageable for them to find new markets.”

While that sounds like a small number, it equates to around 25,000t of seed potatoes annually imported into the UK to be used for ware production — enough for around 20% of the English ware area — plus another 500ha of high-grade seed for multiplication.

An approximate calculation comparing



The small size of the UK seed market means that politicians aren’t interested in it so there’s little impetus to do something about the Brexit impasse, suggests Richard Baker.

the UK's likely seed requirements with British seed production by Cygnet PB marketing manager Alistair Redpath, suggests the chipping and pre-pack growers are more likely to face challenges sourcing key varieties.

For example, seed of key chipping variety Agria has been historically grown in the EU rather than from domestic production, while supplies of some pre-pack varieties could also be tight based on these calculations.

"With some Dutch-bred varieties being more susceptible to blackleg, a mix of

It will be much harder to respond to an unexpected demand in varieties as preferences switch, says Alistair Redpath.

British and EU seed production helps manage the higher risk in Scotland in the final commercial generations, while maximising the virus freedom Scotland offers," explains Richard.

But another key reason is the flexibility that has given EU potato seed houses as varieties come to market. By importing seed grown on EU farms in relatively small quantities, it allowed them to see whether ▶



What's allowed and what's not?

The marketing of EU-grown seed potatoes was no longer permitted in Great Britain from 1 July 2021. This includes high-grade seed that previously could be multiplied up for one or more generations by British seed potato growers.

It does not include, however, microplants and in vitro material, and stocks not intended for marketing under the approved-stocks (yellow label) scheme — which facilitates access to trial and experimental material. This should allow promising new varieties to eventually be grown in the UK.

Applications for future marketing authorisations will also be considered on a case-by-case basis, according to Defra.

Similarly, the export of British-produced seed potatoes to the EU was banned from 1 January 2021. Under the terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol, this also means marketing of British seed potatoes in Northern Ireland is also not permitted.

Ware potatoes can still be imported into the UK, which some in the industry are concerned might encourage growers to import 'small ware' to use as seed. "It's stretching the rules, to say the least," says Alistair.

"My big concern is that if imported ware is used in this way, someone will end up with either brown rot or ring rot infecting the watercourses, and all growers in the area won't be allowed to irrigate from their main water



There's concern that the import ban on seed may encourage some growers to import 'small ware' to use instead, which could lead to problems with brown rot and ring rot.

course. That's the risk from a volume of illegal trade and there are growers talking about doing this."

The ware grower's view

Ely-based P J Lee and Sons has gradually transitioned towards using more British grown seed potatoes to produce its 35,000-40,000 annual tonnage of chipping potatoes over the past 10 years.

That's put the business in a stronger place to adapt to the prohibition on importing seed potatoes from the EU, says the firm's Christopher Lee.

Historically the company preferred French or Dutch seed, as they felt the quality was more reliable helped by better storage facilities. But as the business grew it needed a greater mix of physiologically aged seed, which led to gradually using both English and Scottish-produced seed, he explains.

"Over the past two or three years we've been using over 50% English and Scottish-produced seed."

Christopher says that visits in the UK to discuss their requirements, together with constructive feedback, has led to the development of good partnerships with growers and seed houses.

"We have a good rapport with seed houses to understand our demands, and growers to supply it. We're confident that the English and Scottish seed is 'up to the mark' for our business going forward."

That doesn't mean it's completely straightforward. "A quarter of our acreage is Agria — all from EU sources, and that's now not available because of this issue. So we're trying to find Agria equivalents that can be grown here in the UK, which our customers will accept."

Agria is popular because of its yellow flesh and taste, he says, and can be grown either with or without irrigation, producing a bold rounded tuber. But producing seed in the UK has proven to be challenging because of bacterial infections causing blackleg.

Potential replacements could be Babylon, another Agrico variety with the same parentage; Sagitta from HZPC and other similar varieties, he says. "We've been growing Babylon for three years, which has been bred to be a replacement, and it's nearly the same as Agria. But it needs to



Christopher Lee says a quarter of the farm's seed acreage is Agria — all from EU sources, and that's now not available because of this issue.

be multiplied up.

"Other varieties don't quite taste the same, so losing Agria is a real sticking point as you have to argue with customers to buy something else. Predicting what variety they will buy is challenging, so there is a worry about how we're going to fulfil that Agria market — you can't really do that with Markies, for example."

Potato seed

► a new variety would be successful in UK conditions and its market and, if it was, gradually transition away from EU grown seed to UK produced seed, he explains.

“By producing in one place in Europe we could serve a lot of markets. If a variety looked interesting, we would bring over 20t of Dutch Class A seed and plant that for ware. If it was a success, the next year we would bring over 20t again, but also 20t of high-grade seed to produce 100t of English seed from that.

“At the same time, we would bring over a plantlet for SASA and in five years time we would have seed produced in Scotland and/or England. So you transition from ‘EU seed’ to ‘derived from EU seed’ to ‘derived from UK quarantine seed’.”

But now that decision will have to be



A temporary derogation allowed seed to be imported to the UK from the EU this spring so varietal choice wasn't affected.

made before a variety's viability has been proven, he says. “It's a six-year process from deciding you want a plant, to making a mini-tuber, to four generations. The impact of this will be a big loss of flexibility – it will be much harder to respond to an unexpected demand as preferences switch.

Problems ahead

“The financial risk and the cost of bringing a variety through will also change. If this issue isn't resolved, then we will need a total re-evaluation.”

In the short-term, the six-month extension allowed breeders to bring in some extra high-grade seed to help mitigate the shortfall in seed that would have been brought in for direct ware planting.

“The majority of any shortfall for ware growers in 2022 should have been largely mitigated by additional production, but that option doesn't exist for 2023. This year is a small problem compared with next year,” suggests Richard.

Even so, growers should anticipate tight demand for some varieties, believes Alistair. “There's going to be intense competition for certain varieties, such as Agria and Markies, and probably not enough availability for everyone to have their first choice. So growers should assess which alternative varieties might be available, and how will they grow



Under dynamic rules alignment, UK certification schemes could have to alter their standards, and this is a potential stumbling block in re-opening trade in seed potatoes.

in their conditions.”

The British seed houses are producing successful varieties that can help fill the gap, he stresses. “Many of the newer popular pre-pack varieties, such as Nectar and Manhattan, and chipping varieties, including Elland and Alanis, are British-bred with a strong focus on issues such as *Globodera pallida* resistance and dormancy which are key for UK growers.

“Growers should not fear the loss of continental genetics too much,” he concludes. ■

The English seed producer's view

Speaking to CPM on the proviso of anonymity, a prominent English seed potato grower says his business saw the potential ban coming. “The view we took was if the borders are closed — what does that look like?

“Broadly the UK potato industry imported and exported a similar volume of seed potatoes, and our business reflected that. Around 15% of our seed production was for the EU export market, so we prepared for switching that supply off.

“We contacted our UK customers and discussed how much of the seed they were importing we could grow for them in the UK. The response was the equivalent to about 15% of our production.

“So at a grower level we've simply switched things around, and broadly our seed area remains unchanged.”

The increased production is in varieties that were already being grown in the UK, he says.

“The seed houses had a flex position, where they were perhaps growing 90% of the UK requirement and bringing in 10% from the continent if needed. We're now producing that flex in the UK.

“There's a need to be cautious about how much we produce of which variety, but our seed production is contracted back-to-back, so we have a contract with our seed customers that says they will take the seed once it's produced, so there is no risk.”

He is concerned that the ban will mean the UK potato industry will fall behind the EU. “Without the ability to transfer high-grade seed, introducing new [EU-bred] varieties becomes very difficult. I don't expect EU seed houses to run two breeding programmes — it is simply too expensive.

“So if they are running an EU breeding programme, they will seek to introduce and establish new varieties in Europe. If a variety works, then to introduce it into the UK, breeders will have to start with high-grade plant material, go through quarantine and produce mini-tubers which creates this 4-5 year delay.

“It concerns me. The UK potato industry will be behind — we may find that EU ware growers have a head start on yield and quality advantages from new varieties.”



A British seed producer says there's a risk the UK could slip behind its European counterparts due to the delay in access to new varieties that's a consequence of the new trading rules.

It's why he hopes that an agreement can be reached, but only one which is reciprocal. “We can't simply say the challenges for breeding are too great and therefore we must have European seed potatoes arriving in the UK without there being a reciprocal agreement.

“We need to ensure we aren't bringing European seed into the country in a way that adds risk to our own commercial production.”