

People and Water

Mike Chapman [Horticulture NZ](#) talks with AdvocacyUpdate

AdvocacyUpdate: How would you describe the horticulture sector and its makeup?

Mike Chapman: It's a collection of many different structures from large corporates right through to family businesses. We have around 5,000 businesses who make up the commercial fruit and vegetable and berry growers in New Zealand. The products are very diverse - kiwifruit and apples, strawberries, blueberries, vegetables - you name it. It is commercially a very vibrant sector.

AdvocacyUpdate: Horticulture uses international workers a lot. With the borders currently closed, how is that working out for your seasonal workforce?

Mike Chapman: A little bit under 50 percent are normally offshore workers. The thing about seasonal work is it doesn't last that long. It may be two, three months, six months. It's not that attractive for people who want full-time employment, so we have traditionally relied on backpackers from across the world to help with harvest and pruning. They are not so easily accessible these days with the border closed. But, in the future we'll get back to being able to provide great jobs for backpackers who of course stay in the country and spend their money - a perfect solution for New Zealand. Our young New Zealanders also travel overseas, and do exactly the same thing - work and spend in the countries where they are living, so it is a scheme that works really well across the world. It's just with the current Covid crisis, we haven't got those backpackers in New Zealand. The other part of our offshore workforce largely comes from the Pacific islands. And of course, at the moment we haven't got free movement across the border, so in 2021 the biggest challenge facing us is finding enough workers for harvest and then for winter pruning.

AdvocacyUpdate: What is your advocacy around getting some of those essential workers?

Mike Chapman: This time last year we started the conversation with Government, pointing out that we thought we're going to have problems with accessing seasonal labour due to Covid. And of course, as we went into lockdown in March last year, that became very true. So we've worked closely with Ministers, Immigration New Zealand and the Ministry for Primary Industries as well. We're very much engaged with and partnering with Government to do the best we can. But the real problem is Covid, that keeps on stopping us getting the movement we want.

AdvocacyUpdate: Are you able to offer quarantine at your member businesses' premises?

Mike Chapman: A number of our businesses are able to set up quarantine operations and some of these businesses have these operations approved by the District Health Board etc. So we do have the ability to offer quarantine. And with the Pacific Islands, the workforce is coming from Covid-free countries. So we have suggested to Government that there can be some flexibility around how we manage bringing people in from the Pacific and, of course, getting them home again. We're very firmly of the view that we can operate a safe but different system in terms of bringing workers to and from the Pacific - and in terms of tourists from New Zealand going to and from the Pacific - so we're certainly advocating for that. I think the real problem today is that the rapid spread of the virus around the world has made it really difficult for governments to think about opening the borders further. But at the moment, those variants aren't in the Pacific islands, and none of what we're suggesting would actually expose them to it.

AdvocacyUpdate: What are the main things you're advocating for 2021?

Mike Chapman: Well, clearly labour is one of them because we are continuing to grow. In the last 10 years horticulture has grown 64 percent in terms of value and, subject to getting the labour we need, that can continue. But the real challenge facing all New Zealand businesses and industry, particularly the primary sector, is water.

And as we see the effects of climate change affecting New Zealand, access to water storage is going to be absolutely vital. About 74 percent of New Zealand's exports come from the primary sector. So it's the main driver of New Zealand's wealth and the ability to buy things from overseas. What we do need for plants and animals is water. And what we don't have at the moment is adequate water storage in many places around the country. It's something that has to be actioned quickly and at the right scale. So that's been a real drive for us of late to push for water storage.

AdvocacyUpdate: Do we need more dams?

Mike Chapman: Well, we need more storage, and dams allow you to better recharge aquifers so you can use nature's water tanks under the ground. In New Zealand, 80 percent of the rain that falls washes out to sea, so there's an enormous potential for us to capture water and use it really sensibly into the future. Horticulture in New Zealand is farmed on only 80,000 hectares of land - that's for all vegetables and fruit and berries - whereas if you take dairy, it's two million hectares. This potential for us to increase horticulture means that we need water, and we need labour. So water and the workforce are key ingredients going forward. That's where our core focus is in 2021.

AdvocacyUpdate: What requires fixing with regard to water storage?

Mike Chapman: The complexities of getting approvals to build even a small private dam on your own land are unbelievable. It takes a long time and it's really expensive. You can spend a decade working for getting the approvals and the engineering required. So we need to really think a lot smarter because we haven't got a decade to wait. As climate change grows, the country will get more and more droughts down the East Coast. That's where we grow a lot of our horticultural product and other primary sector products, dairy in particular.

AdvocacyUpdate: What's the hold-up?

Mike Chapman: The hold-up of water storage is because of the complexities imposed by the Resource Management Act, and also the public's understanding about the importance of water, so it's a dual issue. It's about freeing up the roadblocks under the Resource Management Act - but it's also getting people in New Zealand to understand the importance of water for the country's survival.