

The Forgotten Farm Worker

THE BRITISH FARM WORKER: EXTINCT OR EXTANT?

Since the 1850s, the number of farm workers in the UK has declined dramatically, from approximately **1.7 million workers** to an estimated **300,000 today**¹. Contemporary research into farm labour tends to concentrate on seasonal workers, more specifically, migrant labour.

But these only make up 1/3 of the agricultural labour force. Other farm labour contributors have become the **'blind spot'**² of agricultural research. But whilst attention has been diverted, patterns in farm labour have emerged which could have an enormous impact on the future of farming in the UK.

METHOD

A postal survey of farmers in SW England - **1251 completed questionnaires**

46 semi-structured interviews with a range of farmers, farm workers and contractors

RESULTS

38% of surveyed farmers struggle to find *skilled* labour when required, and according to interviews, this shortage is increasing annually

87% of all farms surveyed regularly use **agricultural contractors** for labour requirements, whilst **38%** still employ **full-time workers** and **30%** employ **part-time workers**

Agricultural contractors are also reporting **shortages in labour availability**

Farmers expect to see an **increase** in use of both hired labour and contractors on their holdings in the **next five years**



What is an agricultural contractor?

A business external to the farm who performs tasks such as...

...ploughing, sowing, drilling..

..and fertiliser and pesticide application.



LABOUR CRISIS LOOMING

Quantitative results show that farmers are struggling to find skilled labour.

Follow up interviews show that across the board it is becoming more difficult to find suitable candidates for vacant positions.

Applicants are said to lack basic agricultural skills, often despite having attended an agricultural college.

More advanced skills associated with new technologies and machinery are stated, by employers, to be absent in many of the job seeker's skill sets.

Local applicants often lack the required work ethic or fail to show up altogether once offered a job.

New entrants need to be encouraged back into the workforce

IMPLICATIONS

If farmers can't get the staff they need, then it is quite likely that they will have to do one of three things.

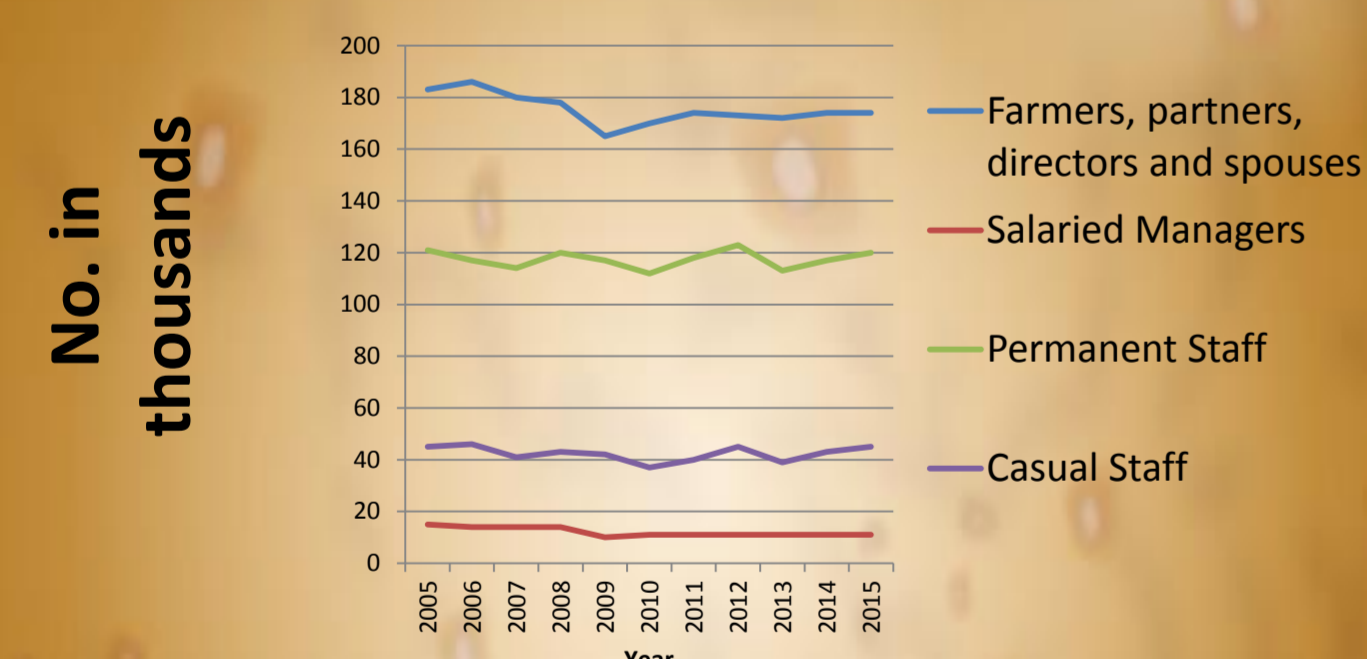
Automate the work previously done by humans, often too expensive for many, especially small farms.

Change their farming system to one that requires less labour input. This can be very difficult for farmers whose families have been farming a certain way for generations. It also means less variation in what is farmed overall in the area. This option will most likely require the use of more contractors, so whether directly employed by the farm, or self-employed, these workers will still have to come from somewhere. Certain skills and knowledge attached to the land could be lost forever.

The business will have to move out of farming altogether.

ON THE UP!

Requirements for farm workers are no longer on the decline.



In fact, we need an estimated **60,000 new entrants over the next ten years**³.

These farm workers will require a significant range of skills due to the rapid development in machinery and agricultural technologies.

CRUCIAL CONTRACTORS

The majority of farm businesses of all sizes and types are now reliant upon agricultural contractors, a significant source of agricultural labour.

There is a huge, unexamined web of agricultural contractors in south west agriculture, many of whom have crossed over from a farm worker or farmer position.

Contractors describe themselves as invisible and misunderstood by the government, the public and/or the research agenda.

Their role is pivotal not only for the success of farming in the south west but also for employment provision in rural communities.

Suggestion for policy-making - the implementation of the **HUMAN CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK**, a tool that matches **capacities** with **opportunities** to ensure that the needs of farm workers, contractors and employers are met, and encourage new entrants into the industry.



³Defra 2015

²Clutterbuck 2013

¹Bolton et al 2015 & Defra 2013