

4.11 Deputy K.C. Lewis of the Minister for Economic Development regarding help for farmers currently facing the worst potato crop for 50 years:

What strategy, if any, is the Minister proposing for the future, in order to help farmers currently facing the worst potato crop for in years?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean (The Minister for Economic Development):

Could I ask my Assistant Minister, the Constable Norman to deal with this question.

Connétable L. Norman of St. Clement (Assistant Minister for Economic Development - rapporteur):

A good strategy, a very good strategy, would be to pray for rain. I say that because the current problems are almost exclusively drought-related and what we have to do and what we do very strongly is to keep the brand image strong; as strong as we possibly can. This, at Economic Development, we are doing with vigour. Very recently we had a very strong and successful presence at the recent Real Food Festival in London with simultaneous promotional activity in top London restaurants showcasing Jersey produce, including of course the world famous or the Western Europe famous Jersey Royal potato. There is a lot of P.R. (public relations) activity going on to make sure the brand remains strong and people remain aware of it. I am sure I do not have to tell Members but farming is a volatile business, subject more than most to the vagaries of the weather and the market. No one knows this better than the local potato growers who are experienced enough to recognise and plan for the fact that some years will be less successful than others. It is also worth mentioning, I think, that we shall shortly be publishing the Rural Economy Strategy White Paper which will be going out to consultation which will address risk management approaches and further levels of support to the Island agricultural industry. Thank you.

4.11.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I thank the Assistant Minister for his reply. My question prompted by farmers contacting me with reports of many potatoes being the size of marbles. The Royal is facing competition in the U.K. from cheap foreign imports and I am delighted to hear the Minister saying they are increasing the P.R. in that respect. The Jersey tomato is a shadow of its former self and it would be an absolute disaster if the Jersey Royal potato followed suit. Does the Assistant Minister agree?

The Connétable of St. Clement:

Yes, absolutely, I could not agree more. The Jersey Royal is as integral to Jersey as is its beaches, its Jersey cow and its finance industry. We are going to give it every support that we possibly can. Unfortunately the Economic Development Department is not responsible for the weather. If it were, it would be much better.

4.11.2 The Deputy of St. John:

Given we are told that this is a one in 50 years event, would the Minister agree that the one in 49 ... the other 49 years were good, we would have expected the industry to have put funds aside and would he agree considerable funding is at hand through area payments *et cetera* so the industry is not yet on its knees. Given we see huge rents being paid for land and the industry has no longer small tenant farmers but 2 huge conglomerates within the Island who have a war chest to fight each other and therefore can dig into that for support?

The Connétable of St. Clement:

I think what the Deputy is saying is that the agricultural industry is in good heart and in good standing and I absolutely agree with him. We have seen massive investments in the agricultural industry, both with the potato area and in the dairy industry running to in excess of £20 million of private money in the last 2 to 3 years which shows great confidence. We are seeing more land under cultivation than we have for many, many years. We have seen the price of land, the rental value of the land, increasing showing that the demand is there. We have seen growers advertising in the local newspaper for land because they cannot get enough land on which to grow their crops. As I said, the confidence, I think, is there. Things like this happen and hopefully it is a one-off but, as I said, no one knows more than the growers the vagaries of the weather which can occur and they plan for such eventualities financially I would expect, and knowing the type of people involved in the industry these days I have got no doubt that this is the case. We, for our part, will continue to promote the brand.

4.11.3 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Once again I wish to remind the Assembly that I do have a commercial interest in the production of Jersey Royals. I feel bound to ask the Minister this question; is the Minister aware that many Jersey Royal growers disapprove and are embarrassed by this question and I wish to inform the Assembly and the Minister that I received many phone calls this morning, messages from growers, who at this time of economic hardship for Islanders, retailers, small businesses, hoteliers, they wish to disassociate themselves from this question and the underlying suggestion made in it by the Deputy Lewis of St. Saviour.

[11:15]

The Connétable of St. Clement:

I have to confess that I have yet to meet an embarrassed Jersey farmer but ... and I certainly have not received the calls that it is implied other Members have received about the current difficult situation. But I think quite honestly the question is fair. I think the Deputy, the States and the Island need to know and be reassured that the Economic Development Department and the Agriculture Department in particular, is continuing to support the brand of the Jersey Royal and, as I said, that we will continue to do with vigour.

Connétable D.J. Murphy of Grouville:

I think Senator Perchard has rather beaten me to it. I have also had several phone calls from growers this morning highly embarrassed about this situation and they are saying they completely deny it. They are perfectly happy.

4.11.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Assistant Minister consider issuing sacks of potatoes to any representatives of Jersey Finance or Ministers when they are visiting India, Hong Kong and China to show the population over there of the true diversity of the Jersey economy and kill 2 birds with one stone?

The Connétable of St. Clement:

This is already happening. I just have a feeling that might have been a facetious question, but the reality is the Jersey produce is already being promoted in the

countries that the Deputy mentioned, including India and China, mainly through the innovations and the industry of Jersey Dairy who are promoting products in those areas. There is a wonderful interest from all over the world these days, particularly since the legislation changed about the importation of bull semen for the importation or exportation from Jersey to these countries of Jersey cattle. There is huge opportunity out there for the agriculture industry as a whole. We have got to grab them. As I said, we will be supporting them.

4.11.5 The Deputy of St. Mary:

Senator Perchard and the Constable of Grouville have rightly pointed out that the problem is not quite what it seems but certainly some fields are performing better than others and I can see that for myself. The Minister said: “Pray for rain”. I want to go back to the question of water because that is what this question is really about. It is about rain. I am surprised that the Minister hardly mentioned it apart from saying facetiously that we should pray for it. I just want to know what his comments are on the issue of rain harvesting within agriculture in order to be more resilient as climate change proceeds.

The Connétable of St. Clement:

I have absolutely no idea what rain harvesting means. If it means increasing storage for the water that falls on this Island, there is plenty of water that falls on this Island - I know from my experience a few years ago when I was director of the water company. There is a lot of water that falls on this Island and unfortunately we have got very limited storage space. But I see from recent announcements that the water company have plans to increase capacity and that will be welcomed, I am sure, by the entire community, not just the agricultural community.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I was meaning by the agricultural community themselves, for example, on glasshouse sites where there is plenty of water going to waste.

The Connétable of St. Clement:

I am not sure of water going to waste particularly on glasshouse sites, certainly water is going to waste when the reservoirs are full throughout the Island.