

Trying to make a difference

LAST week Defra published the fruit and vegetables task force review. I was a member of the cross-industry task force, which split into sub-groups of production, supply chain and consumption, and I chaired the supply chain group.

The task force was set up to propose what we could do to increase consumption of fruit and veg from the current 3.7 a day to the five widely accepted as the ideal, and to see how we could grow more of what we eat in the UK.

The production sub-group concluded much of what was getting in their way was of a regulatory nature: planning, seasonal labour, availability of water, although they also highlighted shortage of research and development funding. It was pointed out that the increase in soft-fruit consumption had come from a relentless focus on improving the product, in taste, shelf life and availability – of course supported by R&D.

The supply chain group therefore looked at why Producer Organisations (POs) hadn't taken off in other sectors in the UK: we concluded there had to be clearer guidance from Defra on setting up a PO and how it should operate: the UK has lots of small, single product POs and few multi-product ones which can compete with the likes of the £1.5bn turnover Dutch Greenery.

The EU set up the grant system to encourage consolidation so growers had more power in the supply chain; this has worked on



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the continent, but apart from soft fruit and peas, has not had the same impact in the UK.

I have written before about the huge opportunity in the wholesale sector, where most fruit and veg comes from the continent, because the structure and availability are easier to work with. Quite a few of our recommendations were about making the wholesale sector easier for British growers to understand and access, but we need to match the service they are getting from the continent and not treat them as an emergency outlet for sub-standard or surplus stock.

The consumption group came

up with radical proposals to change the VAT regime so it aligned with five-a-day objectives. It is a farce a fruit juice or smoothie attracts VAT when cakes and biscuits don't. There is a sensible recommendation that healthy composite foods, such as a pasta sauce with a portion of vegetables in it per serving, should be labelled as one of the five-a-day.

Growers wanted potatoes to be included in five-a-day: they are full of vitamins and far better than pasta if eaten healthily. We didn't win the argument, as they are also a carbohydrate, but the report did state potatoes should be promoted alongside the five-a-day message. Another key recommendation from all groups was to increase availability of British fruit and veg in the frozen sector. Many of those in the UK with the lowest uptake of fruit and veg are on lower incomes and purchase heavily from the freezer cabinet.

I hope our recommendations will go some way to make a difference to the health of the nation as well as its farming industry. It is great our recommendations went straight to the new Minister's desk and were published in full. But many of the recommendations don't need Government to do the work; we need to do it ourselves.

■ *Christine Tacón is general manager of the 24,300-hectare (60,000-acre) Co-operative Farms. She was awarded the CBE for services to agriculture in 2004 and was a member of the Sustainable Food and Farming Implementation Group.*