

The Fruit and Vegetables Aid Scheme

Vital support driving innovation and sustainability through co-investment with industry

Angus Growers is a co-op of 16 members, based in Angus, Perthshire, and Fife, who grow strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, and cherries.

The co-op has seized the opportunities the Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme has provided its members and, since 2013, has invested over £18 million through their operational programme, with member contributions matched by additional funding. This includes five key trial projects that are playing a crucial role in shaping the future of soft fruit production.



Research and Development

The Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme support for research and development activities has been key to enabling Angus Growers to innovate and improve their production in a variety of ways:

Propagation

Historically, soft fruit plants have been imported from the Netherlands, which has several professional propagation businesses. Importing plants obviously has a carbon cost but there are other drawbacks risks to this practice. The plants exported may not be of the highest quality and health, potentially leading to lower yields and the possibility of disease, requiring more pesticide applications.

To reduce risk and increase resilience, Angus Growers have co-invested in propagation trials through the Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme. The scheme has funded the tunnels, trays, and irrigation systems necessary to establish a propagation system and trial operation.

Successfully propagating plants on behalf of its grower members will reduce costs, better control plant health, and allow selection of only the best crops to plant on, to produce high quality food.

Growing media

As an alternative to peat, Angus Growers grow almost all their fruit in coir. Coir is made from coconut husks in tropical countries and exported around the world. The length of this supply chain, the raw materials and processing used, all add to its carbon footprint and can also result in delivery delays.

The Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme funding has enabled Angus Growers to experiment with blending spent coir with woodchip, hemp, wool, heather, and bracken, and trial these alternatives, with some of these trials now upscaling. Finding viable alternatives closer to home will help increase business resilience, improve their environmental footprint and reduce risk.

Pesticide reduction using technology

Perfect, unblemished fruit is a market requirement. Angus Growers employ their own agronomists, who work with growers to achieve this, but the work is difficult and costly. The use of pesticides has been reduced over the last few years meaning growers must use alternatives, at significant cost.

The Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme funding has enabled Angus Growers to pilot UV light robots to prevent and control disease. These robots autonomously shine a UV light on fruit plants, killing disease-causing microbes.

Results indicate they can reduce powdery mildew pesticide treatments by 60-100%. And increase fruit production by 15%. A win-win for high-quality berries and a lower pesticide future.



Without this funding, Angus Growers would not have had the means or confidence to invest in this R&D work. The nature of a Producer Organisation, where multiple businesses, large and small, come together to pool their resources and work together, creates opportunities and benefits that a single business could not achieve.

Other Benefits

Nature restoration

Angus Growers have chosen to be LEAF accredited. This is not a market requirement. Members feel it is the right thing to do and this point of difference helps their positioning within the marketplace. The Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme supports LEAF accreditation as well as funding an ecologist to work across Angus Growers' membership. This collective approach, across multiple sites, will bring environmental benefits greater than the sum of their parts.

Carbon auditing

The Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme has funded carbon audits for all Angus Growers' members, as well as advice and emissions reduction plans with growers, such as improving irrigation, chill chain management, and renewable energy generation. This advice and these actions help reduce emissions and help the horticultural sector play its part to meet the Scottish Government's climate targets.

Upgrading poly tunnels

Angus Growers grow all their soft fruit in protected conditions in plastic poly tunnels. The plastic on the poly tunnels on some farms is over ten years old and no longer allows in the right levels of light, impacting yield. The Fruit and Vegetables Aid Scheme supports investment in new plastic, allowing the upgrade to poly tunnels which enables increased production, optimises yield and reduces the need for pesticides to combat diseases.



Benchmarking

The Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme supports benchmarking work, allowing Angus Growers' agronomists to work with members to identify and share best practice, what works well (and doesn't) accelerating the uptake of best practice and innovations.

As well as finding efficiencies, controlling costs, and improving output, benchmarking gives Angus Growers a growing cost evidence base. This is used to negotiate prices with customers. In these difficult times of high costs and volatility, benchmarking has helped businesses survive.

Scheme Impact

Fear of failure halts innovation. The Producer Organisation Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme helps overcome this fear through co-investment with industry, driving innovation. At the same time helping businesses improve productivity, reduce costs, adapt to market demands, achieve long-term growth, and enhance sustainability.

Without the support of the scheme, only a few very large businesses would have the capacity to innovate in the ways described above, which are vital for continued survival, let alone success in this sector. The resultant concentration of fruit production through just a few businesses would also increase risk to the supply chain. Any unexpected problem could have a major impact.

Within a Producer Organisation, all diverse members, large and small, share both risk and competitive advantage. This bakes resilience into the supply chain, the businesses, and rural communities they are a part of.

Support from the Producer Organisation Fruit & Vegetables Aid Scheme has been invaluable to help drive innovation and co-investment, creating numerous business and environmental benefits for Angus Growers and its members.