Let the train take the strain

Potato grower sets sights on rail

BY JOE WATSON

A Moray potato grower has shipped what could be the first of many loads of seed potatoes bound for export by rail.

Higgins Agriculture, based at Alves, near Elgin, loaded the Hermes on to its containers, which were then taken by rail to Grangemouth for loading on to a ship for export to Saudi Arabia.

General manager David Chalmers said the firm had been investigating rail use for some time and, thanks to financial assistance from Hermes, it had become possible.

He said: “The Higgins Group has always innovated in methods of handling the potato crop, both in England and Scotland.

“Managing director David Higgins has encouraged the Scottish part of the group to look at ways of reducing cost and carbon footprint in every aspect of our handling and in the transport of our crops.

“We see it as a more efficient transport solution for the business as we ship 4,000 to 5,000 tonnes of seed potatoes by container from Morayshire annually.”

Mr Chalmers said this would remove a huge number of lorry journeys from the road.

“The rail option is still more expensive than road currently and we are receiving support through Hermes to allow us to take part in the trial,” he said.

“We hope that it is successful and can be made a sustainable and economic option for the future transport of our crops.

“It would also be very helpful in the businesses, so we could use the container facility in Aberdeen for crops grown around that region.”

Mr Chalmers said Higgins loaded 40-50 transport containers a week during the annual peak export season, between October and December, from its store at Longniddry.

And it was a huge burden on the roads to get them south on already busy routes, including the A90 to Aviemore and then the A9 south.

“The road network the lorries use is creaking with the level of usage.”

Mr Chalmers said this would require all growers to co-operate and offer large volumes so rail firms to make it more attractive to them. The rail option is only price-competitive due to the support we are receiving from Hermes, which we are grateful for,” he added.

Mr Chalmers said it had been a year of mixed quality for seed production. Yields were variable, with crops in the north doing better than those in Perth and Angus.

The dry weather in July and August had thrown up the challenge of increased levels of common scab on tubers.

Mr Chalmers said: “Tolerances of this disease are very tight in key export markets, such as Egypt, so grading will be very challenging as in many cases this market is the only option for a variety.”

Seed crops in Scotland should all be lifted by now. Higgins is Elgin is sending a harvester down to its operations in England to assist as conditions there were difficult in recent weeks because of weather problems.

Higgins exports about 70% of the 4-5,000 tonnes of seed it produces annually. It has a 47% share of the market in Moray. Export destinations also include Thailand, Israel, Germany and Indonesia.

However, the firm is looking at opening sales to new international markets, although Mr Chalmers said it was always a long and difficult process to do that as it required requirements and protocols were often challenging.”

He added: “The trade is a bit nervous after the issues some had last year and the ongoing political unsure there makes doing business very challenging this season.”

The main varieties exported by Higgins Agriculture are Hermes and Atlantis.

It also ships some Charisma, Olympus, Horizon, Maris Peer, Russet Razzle and Zorba.