

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 Searoute's 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 Hitrans, it had become possible.

He said: "The Higgins Group has always inno-

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ated 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 Hitrans 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 to the business if we could use the container facility in Aberdeen for crops grown around that region."

Mr Chalmers said Higgins loaded 15-20 transport containers a week during the annual peak export season, between October and December, from its store at Longhilloch.

And it was a huge burden on the roads to get them south on already busy routes, including the A95 to Aviemore and then the A9 south.

"The road network the lorries use is creaking with the level of usage and anything which can take a large volume of lorries off them must be considered," said Mr Chalmers.

He hopes that, with increased use, the rail option could become cheaper in the longer term and be price competitive with road transport.

However, Mr Chalmers said this would require all exporters to co-operate and offer large volumes to rail firms to make it more at-



BIG DEAL: From left, David Chalmers, buyers Mohamed Hassim and Samir Abdalazam and Higgins's David Scott. Photograph: Gordon Lennox

tractive to them. The rail option is only price-competitive due to the support we are receiving from Hitrans, 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 faring 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 at Elgin is sending a harvester down to its op-

erations in England to assist as conditions there were difficult in recent weeks because of weather problems.

Higgins exports about 70% of the 8-9,000 tonnes of seed it produces annually. It has 14 full-time staff 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 their requirements and protocols were often challenging to fulfil.

The potato boss said the continued political unrest in Egypt, now Scotland's main export destination for seed and accounting for more than 40% of sales, was a worry.

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

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

It also ships some Charlotte, Olympus, Horizon, Maris Peer, Russet Burbank and Zorba.