

Meeting of the Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 June 2014

Members' Business Debate: Potatoes

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-10025, in the name of Claire Baker, celebrating the Scottish spud. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges the success of Scottish potatoes at home and abroad, recognising what it understands is their sector value of around £100 million; believes that around 80% of British seed potatoes are grown in Scotland, including in Mid Scotland and Fife, and welcomes that Scotland is classified as a high grade region for seed potato production and that only pre-basic or basic potatoes can be marketed and planted in Scotland; understands that 30% of seed potatoes grown in Scotland are exported to EU and non-EU countries, resulting in Scotland being Europe's second biggest seed exporter; further understands, however, that the consumption of fresh potatoes in Scotland has declined by 13% since February 2012 compared to a 9% and 10% fall in England and Wales; believes that the work undertaken by organisations such as the Potato Council to develop and promote the potato industry is vital for the sector in Scotland; celebrates the Grow Your Own Potatoes project, which is in its 10th year, noting that nearly 800 schools across Scotland are getting ready to harvest their latest crops; highlights what it sees as the important research being conducted by the council, which currently involves around 30 projects, and considers that potatoes are a sustainable, affordable and healthy product that are part of a balanced diet.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am delighted to be holding this debate and I thank members for supporting my motion.

Last September, I was asked to host a British Potato Council round-table event. I will be honest. There were other events on in the Parliament that night and I thought, "I've got to go and talk about potatoes all night." However, it was genuinely one of the most interesting meetings that I have ever been to in the Parliament and I left it a complete convert to the value of Scottish produce and the importance of potatoes, which we hardly ever talk about in the Parliament or, I would argue, do enough to promote.

Potatoes are affordable, environmentally friendly, a staple of a healthy diet, nutritious, and a leading Scottish product. I will admit to being teased about holding a potato debate this evening, but we need only look at Scottish potato exports. In the Parliament, we frequently talk about whisky and salmon as leading Scottish exports, which have targets to increase their global reach, and yet Scotland is the second biggest producer of seed potatoes in Europe. Almost 30 per cent of seed potatoes grown in Scotland are exported to EU and non-EU countries. We export to more than 40 countries, including Egypt and Morocco. That is quite impressive, but we do not talk about our exports or our global importance in that area.

We are not always grateful for Scotland's weather but we have a great combination of soil and weather for producing a world-leading product—a product that many other countries rely on. At a time when we talk a lot about food security, potatoes are an important cornerstone of Scottish produce. We should be looking at ways to support and grow the sector. Like all areas of farming, there are yearly challenges and fluctuations in price and productivity, but in 2012 the estimated value of potatoes was £160 million. Eighty per cent of all British seed potatoes are grown in Scotland, with a sector value of around £100 million. It is a significant sector and a Scottish success story that we should celebrate.

I mentioned food security, but we could look at other global challenges, such as sustainability and addressing climate change. Food chains and production have a significant role to play in addressing those challenges.

Potatoes that are grown in Britain use just 29 per cent of the average amount of water consumed by the crop across the rest of the globe. The journey from field to plate is much shorter than it is for other comparable produce. If we think about the water, energy and air miles that are used to produce rice and pasta, we can see that potatoes compare very favourably. Work is, however, being done for the future. The James Hutton Institute is investing in research for the sector and developing varieties that require less fertiliser and water input, and so can be grown with a smaller environmental footprint. Potatoes that can withstand environmental pressures are good for the export market but they are also good for future proofing our own produce against the impact of climate change at home.

However, the potato sector is facing significant challenges. Consumption has fallen across the United Kingdom, but more significantly within Scotland. Since February 2012, consumption of fresh potatoes in Scotland has fallen by 13 per cent compared to 9 per cent in England and 10 per cent in Wales.

We can suggest several reasons for that. Our eating habits have changed. We have seen an increase in the use of pasta, rice and noodles; we have many more options than we did generations ago, when meat and potatoes were the staples. Lifestyles have also changed: we lead busy lives combined with less meal preparation. When someone gets home from work, potatoes might not seem like the obvious thing to cook, if they plan to cook at all. The impression is that they take a while to prepare, but supermarkets and producers are trying to respond to that with more convenient but fresh produce options. Product development is trying to address the issues of consumption.

We have also seen a shift in the type of potatoes that we buy. We are in new potato season, and I hope that members will come along to the Potato Council event at lunch time tomorrow and try some new season potatoes. They will be most welcome. The consumer is increasingly buying smaller potatoes and smaller bags. Although that might help with consumption figures, it leaves the Scottish potato market vulnerable and too seasonally focused.

Research also has a significant role to play. We all like good-looking fruit and veg these days. Although there is a job to do with the consumer accepting produce that looks like it has actually been grown in a field, there are also advantages to improving the appearance and nutritional profile, reducing greening and sprouting, and developing better flavour. All those issues can contribute to how we increase consumption.

Of course, there is always the perception that potatoes make us fat. That is probably one of the most difficult myths to address and reverse. Starchy foods are our main source of carbohydrate and are important in a healthy diet, but the idea that potatoes are heavy in calories persists. When I spoke to people about the debate, I was surprised by how many people still have that impression. It is often not the potato, but the butter, the oil, or the salt that we add that is the problem. Potatoes with skins on are a great source of energy, fibre, B vitamins and potassium, as well as vitamin C. The UK Department of Health has recently changed its dietary advice to include potatoes with skins, along with wholegrains, as a source of fibre.

There is, however, no defined portion size for potato in the UK, unlike the 80g that is recommended for fruit and vegetables. It would be good to have clarity on that because it would help with the promotion of healthy eating guidance to consumers. If it was true that potatoes caused weight gain, we would not necessarily see falling consumption alongside increasing obesity figures.

Last year, I asked the Minister for Public Health about the goal of increasing potato consumption by 25 per cent, a target that was in the preventing overweight and obesity in Scotland route map, and then removed on the basis of advice from the Food Standards Agency. I understand the reasons for changing the advice, but it creates a confusing message for the consumer. I accept that part of that is the difficulty caused by the lack of an evidence base about health benefits, but that needs to be resolved and a clear message given about the nutritious value of potatoes and the role that they play in a healthy diet. While no one denies their value, potatoes miss out on positive promotion as they are not part of the five-a-day message, and they miss out on positive promotion as a starchy carbohydrate because they are not a wholegrain, which tend to be the focus in that category.

Potatoes are affordable. We have seen an increase in cost in recent years, but we have seen an increase in food prices across the shopping basket. Food prices are predicted to rise faster than incomes every year until 2018. There is significant pressure on global food prices and feeding a family gets more difficult. Potatoes remain an affordable product and one that people can grow themselves. I know that the Potato Council, as well as representing the sector, has been doing a lot of work with schools and has been supporting them through the grow your own potatoes project.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the D-day landings and the British Nutrition Foundation is using that opportunity to highlight the potato with what it describes as new nutritional insights into an old wartime food hero. Potatoes can seem old-fashioned and the consumption figures that I mentioned are even starker when we see that consumption is falling much faster among under-40s.

Bearing in mind the global food challenges that we face, and issues such as affordability, nutrition, sustainability and the environment, I believe that we have a Scottish product that we should celebrate and be proud of.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am certainly pleased to contribute to this debate, and I thank Claire Baker for bringing it to the chamber and allowing us to highlight the great Scottish spud's many benefits to our health and the economy.

I have a long association with the great Scottish spud. I grew Kerr's Pinks on the family farms up in Stornoway for the Outer Hebridean market, where their floury dry texture goes so well with local delicacies such as salt herring and guga. Guga, of course, is salt baby gannet, and it is something for which, half a century on from being born on the Isle of Lewis, I have still not managed to acquire a taste. I can say that without worrying about damaging the guga industry, as demand greatly exceeds supply.

My association with the humble spud continued when I trained as a livestock auctioneer with United Auctions in Stirling, where we would regularly hold seed potato sales and where I learned about hundreds of varieties that I had never heard of before. As a trainee auctioneer, I would, after the sale, have to phone in the sale report to The Herald, The Scotsman, The Press and Journal and The Courier. As that was in the days before e-mail and fax, I had to spell out each of the varieties to the copy girls, and I now have varieties such as Desiree, Pentland Javelin, Osprey and Russet Burbank etched on my mind. I am also sure that there are many retired copy girls out there who are extremely relieved at no longer having to type endless lists of potato varieties for hours on end.

Potatoes with colourful names such as Pimpernel, Galactica, Fontane, Asterix and Sylvana are just a few of the 700 varieties held by the Scottish Government in its national potato collection.

Claire Baker: Does the member agree that although we know about the different varieties there should be more variety in our supermarkets and that part of the way to address the problem of consumption is to give the consumer much greater choice in the potatoes that they consume?

Angus MacDonald: Absolutely. The Scottish Government's tonnage figures show that only a handful of varieties are used, and there are many other brilliant varieties out there that people are not but should be made aware of.

Scotland produces 600,000 tonnes of potatoes each year. That tonnage is valued at around £180 million, and around half of it is made up of our world-class seed potatoes, which are clearly the foundation of our potato industry. Scottish seed potatoes are exported to more than 50 countries outside the EU and generate £35 million for the economy; Egypt is the largest seed export destination, with demand up 20 per cent on previous years, and Scotland has now overtaken the Netherlands as the largest seed supplier to that country.

There is lots of good news out there about Scottish potatoes—and, indeed, there is even more. A recent study published in the British Nutrition Foundation's Nutrition Bulletin on the nutritional values of potatoes and potato products in the UK diet revealed that choosing to consume potatoes in place of more energy-dense foods could have a significant impact on reducing calorie consumption and improve nutrient density, potentially contributing to the avoidance of obesity. I am certainly taking note of that. In addition, potatoes as a white vegetable play an important role in enriching the diet by providing important micronutrients as well as dietary fibre and unsaturated fatty acids.

Potato consumption is declining slightly, but it would seem that it should be encouraged, particularly given that, according to the study, potatoes provide on average more fibre, more potassium, more vitamin C, more folate and more magnesium compared with their energy contribution. In other words, potatoes increase the diet's nutrient density and play an important role in improving our diet. They are not only a source of dietary fibre; they provide the micronutrients that I mentioned earlier. In short, provided that care is taken over the amount of added fat and salt, the consumption of potatoes, as white vegetables, should be encouraged alongside the consumption of coloured vegetables as part of a healthy, balanced diet.

My time is limited, but I will squeeze in a bit of praise for the Scottish Rural University College and the work that it continues to do on blight-resistant varieties. Late blight costs Scottish farmers around £500 per hectare, or up to half of all production costs. The SRUC believes that using newer blight-resistant varieties could help to control blight in a more cost-effective way.

It is clear that a lot of work is going on at all stages in the potato industry, from research to growing to marketing. Let us do all that we can to ensure that the humble Scottish spud continues to make a significant contribution to our diet and our economy.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I, too, thank Claire Baker for securing this members' business debate, which is on an important topic that is relevant to Scotland and Scottish exports. I want to confine my remarks to three issues: the health value of potatoes, the health and safety of managing chips, and the future of seed potatoes. The seed potato industry is important.

We have already heard that the Potato Council has demonstrated the significant health benefits of potatoes. I think that the evidence base is now quite strong. I will not repeat all the elements that other members have talked about, but potassium is an important factor, as are the energy and fibre of potatoes and the vitamins that other members have mentioned. For example, vitamin B6 has many important functions, including contributing to normal red blood cell formation, the normal functioning of the nervous system, reduction of tiredness and fatigue, and regulation of hormonal activity.

The Potato Council has produced a number of "healthy eating" recipes that feature potatoes and all of which have fewer than 400 calories per portion. Potatoes are a much undervalued and underappreciated product.

I want to look at chips, because they are one of the favourite potato products. They have had quite a bad press in many ways, of course. We need much firmer standards in chip production. That is necessary for our health and a healthier population.

New Zealand has developed a set of industry standards for potato chips that are based on the best scientific evidence. Its Chip Group, which works to improve the nutritional status of deep-fried chips that are sold in New Zealand, found that chips that are not cooked to the industry standards have up to 20 per cent fat in them. Operators that adhere to the standards produce deep-fried chips with between 7 and 9 per cent fat. To illustrate that, one of its programmes is called "town makeovers". People go to local chip producers and instruct them on the standards.

After one of those programmes in Matamata in Waikato, the annual consumption of fat was reduced by 1,711kg, which is the equivalent of three trailer-loads full of fat. Chips are very popular, so that can have a major effect.

I would like the fish and chips organisation in Scotland to ensure in its programme that no fish and chip shop is given an award unless it complies with the standard that reduces the chips' fat content to less than 9 per cent.

Good technique has other important results. It reduces the levels of acrylamide and furan, both of which are carcinogens. They will be in high prevalence if frying standards are not followed. What will the Government do to ensure that high standards are encouraged?

Finally, I want to deal with seed potatoes, which are an important crop, as has already been said. I will not go into the figures, but as Angus MacDonald mentioned, one of the big problems is potato blight. It causes real problems. I will go into an area that is slightly difficult for us. The current mechanism is the use of Mendelian cross-breeding in order to improve blight resistance. A lot of work is going on at the James Hutton Institute and elsewhere on that, and significant work is also going on in Holland to produce blight-resistant varieties. However, America is going to follow the genetic modification route. Here, existing potatoes from South America and old forms of potato that are almost completely blight resistant are being used, and that will shortcut the approach quite significantly.

Blight has a massive effect on the potato crop across the world. The production of seed potatoes is important to Scotland, so if we are going to survive as a seed potato producing nation, we need to consider a risk assessment of not adopting GM potatoes in order that we can protect our industry's competitiveness. I am not advocating GM, and the industry itself talks about all the public protections that need to be put in place. Nevertheless, we should be very careful that we do not lose out in this area to the Americans, because it is an area of great importance to us.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, thank Claire Baker for securing the debate. This debate exemplifies what members' debates should be about. I thank her very much for bringing the issue to Parliament.

Growing up in Angus, we never spoke about "potatoes"—that was for the toffs—but about "tatties". They were part of our annual calendar of events. From when I was eight years old, I would be sowing tatties in the spring, then we had the three-week tattie holiday in October. Between those times, we were out picking daffodils at Dykelands and picking strawberries and raspberries at Charleton, near Montrose, in the summer holidays. It probably sounds like child slave labour these days, but it was just a normal part of our lives.

Growing up in Montrose, I was aware of the excellent disease-free seed potatoes that are grown in Scotland and exported to many countries, so it is no surprise to hear that overseas demand for seed potatoes has risen by 30 per cent in the past 10 years. However, I have to say that, probably like many people—I make no apology for it—I was not fully aware of the nutritional benefits of potatoes. I was probably not very aware at all of that until I started researching for this debate. It is perhaps lack of knowledge about those benefits that has been responsible for some of the decline of 500,000 tonnes in the potato crop between 2011 and 2013. To me, that seems to be a huge amount.

I also have to confess that the year of the potato 2008 passed me by, so I cannot say that I learned much about the potato that year. However, the briefing from the Potato Council states that in 2008 the Scottish Government published a target, which Claire Baker mentioned, of increasing potato consumption by 25 per cent, which was in “Healthy Eating, Active Living: An action plan to improve diet, increase physical activity and tackle obesity (2008-2011)”. The action plan was set to run for three years. Unfortunately, the Potato Council’s briefing states:

“Subsequent policy documents have been inconsistent in referencing this target.”

I hope that the debate goes some way to addressing that. However, with reference to the goal of increasing potato consumption by 25 per cent, Michael Matheson stated that

“there is no evidence base regarding the health benefits of consuming potatoes specifically”.—[Official Report, Written Answers, 27 November 2013; S4W-18389.]

Well, I have to say that I found plenty such evidence. We have heard plenty of it in the debate and there are plenty more sources.

As Claire Baker said, Scotland is the right place for growing potatoes because the amount of water that is used for the process here is just 29 per cent of the global average for the process. It uses 133 times less water than rice growing and it results in 42 per cent less greenhouse gas emissions than producing pasta does. On the health and nutrition front, a medium potato provides 45 per cent of the daily required amount of vitamin C—I certainly did not know that—more potassium than bananas, spinach or broccoli and 10 per cent of the daily required amount of vitamin B6. All of that is done for 110 calories with no fat, sodium or cholesterol. If I did not know that, how many other people out there do not know it?

Potatoes are fat free and are lower in calories than white rice and pasta; they have almost half the calories of the same amount of white rice and significantly fewer calories than boiled white pasta. In terms of fibre, the potato yields double the amount of fibre that is in pasta and more than 20 times that which is found in boiled white rice. The potato is a superfood, by any other name.

Claire Baker referred to rising food prices, and price is a factor with potatoes, given that products such as pasta and rice can act as very acceptable substitutes for potatoes. I find it worrying that ware potatoes have increased in price from £100 per tonne in 2011 to £270 per tonne in 2012. I hope that that price increase will encourage farmers and other growers to allocate more land to the production of potatoes, given the financial incentive to do so.

I have found the factual information surrounding the debate very interesting. I will be sure to include tatties in my weekly shop from now on. I hope that the debate has raised awareness about the nutritional and health benefits of the potato.

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): I congratulate Claire Baker on securing the debate, which has been fascinating, with interesting and well put together speeches from colleagues across the chamber. The details on nutrition, in particular, were fascinating.

Can any of us imagine haggis and neeps without the mashed tatties, Sunday lunch or dinner without the crisp roasties, or battered fish without the chips—irrespective of the requirements and standards that Dr Simpson highlighted? My personal favourite is the baked potato—can any of us imagine life without those? I could go on with a long list of the many dishes that can be accompanied by what some might call the humble spud, but which, as we have gathered today, can be recategorised as the glorious, versatile potato. Whether fresh or processed, boiled, mashed, baked, fried or crisped, most of us love them in at least one form or another.

Angus MacDonald is a particular expert on potato varieties. I will ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment is made aware of that for future reference.

I thank Claire Baker for raising a debate on one of Scotland's most important crops. As she said, in September 2013 she hosted a round-table event at the Scottish Parliament on tackling tattie targets, which covered many of the issues raised in the motion.

We have a long history of quality food production, particularly of potatoes. The value of the Scottish seed crop alone is approaching, as members have said, £100 million. With more than 11,000 hectares grown in 2013, potatoes from Scotland represent 75 per cent of total UK production. I think that I heard someone mention a figure of 80 per cent, but I hope that we are in agreement that, whatever the figure, it is a very significant share of UK production. We also grow between 16,000 and 18,000 hectares of ware—or eating—potatoes a year.

The total output value of Scottish ware potatoes has doubled from £92 million in 2009 to £188 million in 2013, largely due to a strong increase in price, to which members have referred. Collectively, the value of the Scottish potato sector is £287 million. That represents 9 per cent of Scotland's total agricultural output, so it is a very significant crop for our agricultural sector. If we add to that the fact that Scottish seed potatoes underpin potato production right across these islands, which is worth an estimated £4 billion a year, that confirms the importance of the Scottish potato and why it should be celebrated and valued.

Scotland has many natural advantages for potato production, including the Scottish climate. Our cool summers can be a distinct advantage in limiting virus pressure on Scottish potato crops. That is allied to Scotland's freedom from serious potato quarantine pests like brown rot and ring rot. I am aware that the James Hutton Institute is looking at the impact of climate change on potato production and I look forward to its research.

The freedom from those pests does not happen by chance: it is the result of strong collaboration among growers, the Potato Council and the Scottish Government to ensure that a range of voluntary and statutory measures are in place to maintain and build on our world-wide high-health reputation. That includes the Scottish Government undertaking soil, tuber and water surveillance to monitor for quarantine pests and diseases. We are—rightly—proud of our high-health status, but we cannot rest on our laurels.

Plant health is the root of Scotland's thriving rural economy, which is why, on 18 March, I announced the development of a new Scottish plant health strategy at a workshop with stakeholders. The strategy will be hugely beneficial in helping us tackle the increasing challenges of new pests and diseases that may affect production.

Strong collaboration with all interested parties is vital in protecting our plant health. The Scottish Government works in partnership with the potato industry and the Potato Council to ensure that we have robust measures in place to build on our advantages. We fund potato-related research in Scotland to the value of around £4 million a year and we liaise closely with the Potato Council on that to complement its input and efforts.

Scottish potatoes are consistently successful in the European and international markets. Angus MacDonald and other members mentioned the Egypt market; I think that 49 per cent of our total exports outside the EU go there. Over the current export season, Scottish exporters sent 77,000 tonnes to more than 20 different countries outside the European Union. It has been another very good year for our exporters. Again, that is the result of strong collaboration between our exporters, the Potato Council and Scottish Government working in tandem to nurture existing markets and to develop new ones.

The Scottish spud plays a vital role in the success story that is Scotland's food and drink industry. Since 2008, our food and drink sector has experienced the strongest growth in turnover—it stands at 14 per cent—of all growth sectors in Scotland.

As Claire Baker noted in her motion, the consumption of fresh potatoes has been in decline and dropped by about 25 per cent over the past decade. Consumption of processed potatoes also declined over the same period, by about 13 per cent. As members said, the reason for the decline is unclear, but the decrease appears to be greater in more affluent societal groups, which suggests some form of cultural shift.

Potato prices might also be a factor. As a number of members said, they rose by almost 30 per cent between 2007 and 2012. That increase is close to the average rise in food prices, but it is higher than the price increases for fruit and vegetables in the same period. Research shows that consumer reaction in the UK to price increases has been to buy fewer and cheaper potatoes rather than pay more.

The long-term decline in consumption is a concern and I commend the Potato Council, which has a key role in promoting the sector, and members for raising that issue. The Government consistently recommends and promotes potatoes as an excellent source of starchy carbohydrates. For example, we do that through advice to retailers on product placement through the healthy living programme; the Food Standards Agency Scotland's eat well plate; and the supporting healthy choices guidance, which is due to be published at the end of June.

If a key message has come out of the debate from all members, whom I commend for the detail in which they have described it, it is about nutrition. We have the problem that potatoes are not perceived to be as nutritious as we know that they are. Claire Baker, Mary Scanlon, Richard Simpson and Angus MacDonald all talked about the qualities of potatoes and I will not repeat those points. Most people are not eating enough such food, so increasing our consumption of potatoes is an ideal way of achieving our health targets.

To reflect what Angus MacDonald said, it is important that Scotland's population are in a position to make informed decisions on what they eat. The variety of potatoes that he described was a surprise to me; I had not appreciated that breadth.

The Scottish Government published revised dietary targets in May 2013, following a review by the Food Standards Agency Scotland. Those targets concern the population-wide shift that is required to improve Scotland's dietary health, which includes the intake of starchy foods.

Richard Simpson made a fair point about the way in which potatoes are cooked as chips. I was not aware of the diverse techniques for cooking chips and the effect on the fat content. I will raise that point with my colleagues and see whether we can do anything on it.

Food education is high on the Government's agenda. For example, we have invested £3 million over 2010 to 2015 in teaching our young people about the journey from farm to fork. Initiatives such as the Potato Council's grow your own potatoes programme for primary school children are invaluable in teaching our future generations of consumers about where potatoes come from and how they can be used in diets at home. Perhaps more messaging about the nutritional value of potatoes and guidance on how to cook them could be built into that, to maximise the health benefits.

I am delighted that the grow your own potatoes programme is celebrating its 10th year. Many schools across Scotland grow their own potatoes, which teaches pupils about the role that potatoes can play in a healthy, balanced diet. That fantastic project complements other food education initiatives that the Scottish Government funds, and I hope that it will continue to engage with young people across the country for years to come.

I commend Claire Baker for her motion and I commend all members for their speeches, which were constructive and positive about the industry. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to celebrate the success of our Scottish spuds past, present and future with everyone who is here.

Ends