

GLA investigation into working conditions at Thanet Earth

Response to claims regarding alleged abuse of workers at Thanet Earth

Since early 2010, the Unite union has held a focus on Thanet Earth, making claims to Thanet Earth Marketing, to our retail customers, to the media and to the local community that our labour providers are in breach of various governing codes of conduct with regard to the use of agency workers at our site.

These claims were potentially very serious, with long-term reputational damage likely to be sustained by our business, whether or not we would ultimately find ourselves exonerated. Having failed to satisfy Unite with our own internal investigation into their claims, we requested that the Gangmasters Licensing Authority conduct a full audit enquiry of our labour providers to provide a definitive response and to allow us to remedy any issues discovered.

This enquiry was recently completed, but the GLA are as yet unable to publish a statement about the results. Without official confirmation from them, we are unable to discuss the matters in any detail but we maintain that we shall make information public at our earliest opportunity in order to clear the names of our labour providers and to protect our good reputation.

Four labour providers hold contracts to provide staff to the Thanet Earth site. Each holds a license from the GLA and a current audit compliance certificate. Our site has been audited to check our compliance with the Base Code of the Ethical Trading Initiative too, and passed. Our industry is extremely well-regulated and we believe that there's a very high level of protection for workers in these existing safeguards – much more so than in any other industry that places a similar reliance on agency workers such as construction or hospitality.

We cannot move to a more permanent employment model and stay in business. Thanks to seasonal demand, weather forecasts and events such as sporting fixtures, our requirement for labour fluctuates to such an extent that it is impossible to predict how many people we need on site further than 24 hours in advance. To permanently employ more workers than we already do would be economic suicide. Every business in our industry works this way too.

At the outset of the project, we stated that we would provide employment for in excess of 500 people. At present, we are less than 50% constructed and up to 450 people will be working on our site on a busy day. Once we have our additional 4 greenhouses operational, we would reasonably expect to double that figure. Our site has so far spent over £9m on wages alone.

Our labour providers ensure that they offer their workers flexibility, training and opportunities, along with every required legal protection and employment benefit. Again, they work hard to build a good reputation in our Kent community. These wholly undeserved accusations are extremely damaging to the goodwill they have built over years of successful trading, not just with Thanet Earth but with their many other client businesses in the area.

The Unite union has accused Thanet Earth Marketing of failing to allow workers their right to freedom of association. This is something we continue to categorically rebuff. Our customers are signatories to the Ethical Trading Initiative Base Code <http://www.ethicaltrade.org/eti-base-code> and Thanet Earth Marketing Ltd fully recognises that workers have the right to freedom of association and to 'join or form trade unions of their own choosing and to bargain collectively'. An independent audit has confirmed that we are fully compliant with the Base Code requirements.

Thanet Earth really is a great place to work. Ask the people that actually work here – as agency workers or directly employed. We're a lively, cosmopolitan site with a strong sense of community and a shared purpose. We will continue to defend ourselves in the strongest of terms against the persistent harassment faced by Thanet Earth Marketing and our customers with allegations that we believe will be proven to be wholly unfounded.

UPDATE

12th July 2011



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Clarification re growing crops without soil

As a secondary issue, Unite have persistently attacked Thanet Earth with the claim that as our crops are not grown in soil, they are somehow not grown sustainably or properly. Firstly, we do not grow our plants in fibreglass. They grow in growbags made of Rockwool. It's a fibrous wool product made from volcanic rock. It's very light to transport and is recycled after use. Soil is heavy to transport, harbours too many pests and diseases, is sourced unsustainably, would have to be sterilised and is clearly not recyclable. Rockwool is industry standard and offers a clean, sustainable way of growing. Our fertiliser is created from artificially-produced chemical sources. This offers us a much safer, cleaner source of nutrients than we would get from an organic, waste-based system. This helps us to almost eliminate the risk of our crops carrying bacteria like E.coli. We run a closed loop watering system, so none of our feed mix water enters the local aquifer.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The Gangmasters Licensing Authority is a government regulator of those who supply labour or use workers to provide services in agriculture, forestry, horticulture, shellfish gathering and food processing and packaging. The Unite the Union holds a seat on the board of the GLA. See www.gla.defra.gov.uk for more information.
2. Thanet Earth is a state-of-the-art greenhouse complex in Kent, growing and packing tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers for UK retailers. More information at www.thanetearth.com

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