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Giant greenhouse could reduce reliance on Spanish tomatoes

The proposed facility in Essex would be the second largest in England and would use heat from a nearby incinerator.



The proposed Rivenhall greenhouse could produce 7% of the country's tomatoes, the project's heads say

Ed Moorhouse has been making the argument for Britain reducing its reliance on Spanish tomatoes since last year's floods in Valencia, warning that they could have been devastating for food production had they hit the greenhouse hub of Almeria. That was before a power cut hit the Iberian peninsula last week and growers lost connections to equipment, including irrigation systems.

His answer: Rivenhall, the UK's biggest new greenhouse in 16 years. The proposed 40-hectare facility in a former Essex gravel quarry would be second in size only to the gargantuan Thanet Earth in Kent, which opened in 2009.

British horticulture has had a bumpy ride since then, with many growers' profits eroded by cheap imports and gas prices spiking after Russia invaded Ukraine. "Protected vegetable" production, which includes tomatoes, has fallen in the UK every year since 2015. Things got so bad that Rishi Sunak addressed tomato

"If you have a Valencia storm in Almeria you wipe out 55,000 hectares of polytunnel. Does the European Commission put export controls on fresh produce as a mechanism of safeguarding food inflation within the bloc? That causes us a problem."

Ed Moorhouse



The aftermath of the flooding in Valencia last year (BIEL ALINO/EPA)

If his greenhouse near Braintree is solely used to grow tomatoes, as planned, it would produce 30,000 tonnes a year, which amounts to about 7 per cent of the UK's imports. The UK grows about 14 per cent of the tomatoes it consumes and most are imported from Spain, Morocco and the Netherlands.

Moorhouse is the project director of Rivenhall Greenhouse Ltd and thinks a cheap supply of energy is what he needs to make the scheme work. The greenhouse would be supplied with heat, electricity and carbon dioxide from a new incinerator being built next door on an old airbase by the Dutch firm Indaver. It would be the first greenhouse in the UK to be heated this way and energy prices would be fixed for ten years, protecting the project from future gas-price shocks.

There would be four blocks of greenhouses up to 8m tall, with 13 of the 40 hectares lit. Though it would create about 500 jobs, robot cars would ferry picked fruit around the site for packing.



Ed Moorhouse

With Labour backing planning reforms to spur development and eyeing economic growth and repairs to its frayed relationship with farmers, Moorhouse thinks the timing is right. “We’re talking to the government on food security and resilience. I think this should be a simple blueprint for planning reform,” he said.

However, not everyone is enthused by its size. James Abbott, the Green Party councillor for Silver End and Cressing, Braintree district council, said: “We’re not opposed to it in principle, it’s the sheer scale of it: it’s so vast. You have to see it in the context of this [being] a rural area and yet we are being inundated with development.

“Incinerator, pylons coming through, vast amounts of new houses — we’re not opposed to new housing, it’s the scale. We’ve got quarries, solar farms — we’re not opposed to them — road-building proposals. You name it, we’ve got it. It’s the scale, the cumulative impact of changing this rural area so much.”

Abbott said planners should make Rivenhall smaller.



The proposed facility's size means it would blight the rural landscape, a councillor said

A consultation on the scheme started last Thursday, with Moorhouse hoping the greenhouse can be built largely during 2026, with the first planting between April and June in 2027. "It's going to move the needle on that over-reliance on Spain and Morocco," he said.

A new independent analysis found that if Britons increased their fruit and vegetable consumption to the recommended five portions a day, it could create 23,520 additional horticultural jobs if all the extra food were grown in the UK.

"We need to eat more fruit and vegetables to improve our health. But if we don't grow more of them here, we'll let profitable horticulture and the jobs it could support go elsewhere," said Lydia Collas, head of natural environment at Green Alliance, the think tank that produced the research.