

Watercress producers stand their ground

British watercress farmers are seeking an EU ruling to ensure that land-grown cress cannot be sold as traditionally grown watercress.

The watercress industry has seen sales soar from £30 million to £60m over the past decade, but the NFU Watercress Growers'



NFU Watercress Growers' Association members

Association believes this has led to new producers trying to exploit the boom by cutting set up costs and growing the salad leaf on land and marketing it as watercress, instead of in flowing pure mineral water.

The NFU Watercress Growers' Association fears this will damage the industry and have applied to the EU for Traditional Speciality Guaranteed protected status of the traditional growing methods. Loosely modelled on the French AOC (Appellation d'Origine Controle), the Protected Food Name Scheme was established by the EU to help protect farming communities and to provide a guarantee of food provenance. To qualify a crop or food has to have been produced in the traditional manner for at least 50 years and the majority of the applying member state producers must conform.

To help their case members commissioned comparative taste tests among 100 consumers and 24 trained assessors, which concluded that traditional watercress had a superior flavour to land grown cress.

Association member Dr Steve Rothwell said: "There are tremendous infrastructure costs in growing watercress and obviously the location is also critical so we can harness only the purest flowing water available, from which watercress derives its bounty of nutrients. These new producers are just trying to cut corners and pass off an inferior product as real watercress. There are just a handful of these growers at the moment but if they continue to get away with this then more are sure to follow – which will put the whole tradition of growing watercress under threat.

The association has also won the support of top conservationist David Bellamy. The next stage of the association's application for protected status is for ADAS and DEFRA to consult with industry bodies, allowing three months for objections.