

Do post-Brexit trade deals pose a threat to UK food standards?

Intense debate around issues such as chlorinated chicken imported from the United States demonstrates how concerns about safety, responsible sourcing and animal welfare are not easily washed away.

Health & safety

In 2005 the European Food Safety Authority declared that “exposure to chlorite residues arising from treated poultry carcasses would be of no safety concern”.

However, the use of pathogen reduction treatments (PRTs) that are common practice among American meat manufacturers has sparked debate over the UK ‘dropping standards’ within its strictly-regulated food supply chains in order to pursue post-Brexit trade deals with the United States.

Chlorine-washed chicken may not necessarily cause harm, but concerns have also been expressed over its ability to prevent it; although the method is used as an “effective and economical” way of protecting consumers from salmonella and campylobacter, [recent studies](#) carried out on samples of chicken and spinach indicated that chlorine washing is not guaranteed to kill the pathogens it is supposed to.



Environmental concerns

Consumption risks aside, there remains a degree of concern over the impact of chlorinated water on soil and water systems, as well as the human impact on factory workers who are involved in the process.

A 2008 [Council of Europe](#) decision said that washing chicken with chlorine “can pose a risk to the

aquatic environment, the health of staff working in waste water systems and the operation and performance of sewerage systems and/or wastewater treatment plants”.

[Despite assurances](#) that imported American poultry would not pose a threat to UK consumers, ‘chlorinated chicken’ seems to have become a byword for public concerns over the safety, quality and integrity of food supply chains in general.

Animal welfare

A primary concern for many British politicians and representatives of the farming industry is the lowering of animal welfare standards in meat and dairy supply chains.

The former minister for agriculture George Eustice has cited “woefully deficient” and “patchy” legislation for animal welfare as a principal reason for avoiding US trade deals unless suppliers are required to meet current UK standards.

The same view is shared by NFU boss Minette Batters, who commented that a post-Brexit free trade agreement would be “a betrayal of British farmers, and of British shoppers, who value wanting to buy high-welfare food.



The Soil Association “Risk List”:

As preliminary steps towards a UK/US trade deal post-Brexit are already being taken, the Soil Association has expressed concern over potential threats to British farming, the environment, public health and nutrition.

Their most recent [“food risk list”](#) outlines their top ten concerns relating to American food imports...

Antimicrobial resistance: Investigations have shown that antibiotics crucial to human medicine are still being used in “unacceptable” quantities on US livestock farms, on average 5 times higher than in the UK. US trade deals could risk undermining the efforts UK farmers have been making to reduce antibiotic use, with potentially grave consequences for antimicrobial resistance.

A ‘race to the bottom’: If UK farming is forced to compete on price with countries like the US that operate to different or lower standards, the UK farming industry may become unprofitable.

Loss of access to EU markets: A future lack of alignment with EU standards resulting from a US trade deal could result in barriers to UK farmers and food companies wishing to export their products to the EU’s Single Market.

Chlorine washed chicken: The American poultry industry is more intensive with lower animal welfare standards than in the UK. Subsequently, chicken produced has high levels of bacteria, acid and chlorine washes are used at the end of the production chain.

Hormone treated beef: The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) allows steroid hormone drugs for use in beef production. In 2003 an EU scientific review concluded that one of those commonly used hormones is carcinogenic.

Public health and nutrition labeling: Nutritional ‘traffic light labelling’ has been an important requirement in supporting UK public health. Imported US food already enjoys a voluntary concession to UK labelling requirements. Further trade deals could result in low-cost, ultra-processed foods entering the UK market.

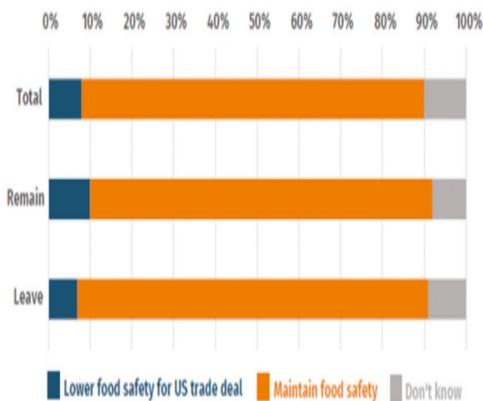
Genetically modified food: In the United States, 88% of corn and 92% of soy are genetically modified. In the EU, GM is widely rejected due to concerns over its safety, and the UK public’s appetite for a GM-free supply chain has risen over the seven years of the Food Standards

Agency (FSA) Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker.

Pesticide regulation: During the negotiations on the proposed EU-US trade deal in 2015, pesticide industry lobbyists in the US pushed to lower environmental and health standards to promote the use of toxic substances prohibited in the EU. Pesticide use has been linked with a decline in insect populations and biodiversity, and with adverse health outcomes.

FIGURE 2: THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE PUBLIC ARE UNWILLING TO SACRIFICE MAINTAINING FOOD SAFETY STANDARDS FOR A TRADE DEAL WITH THE US

Source: Institute for Public Policy and Research



Food poisoning: Incidences of food poisoning in the US affect 14% of the population annually. This is 10 times greater than in the UK, where 1% is affected. When asked whether the UK should lower food safety standards to secure a trade deal with the US, 82% of UK citizens said they would prefer to retain food standards as they are.

Food colourings: In the United States, products are available which contain food dyes that have been banned in the UK since a double blind study in 2007 found that they appeared to increase children's hyperactivity. A US trade deal could see inadequate labelling leaving parents unsure which products could pose a risk to children.

Preparing for change

In the face of new challenges to safe and responsible sourcing, food industry experts including Professor Chris Elliot have declared fully transparent supply chains "no longer optional", with the ultimate goal being that UK citizens can regain trust in the food they rely on.

Come deal or no deal, in-depth knowledge of products and processes will surely offer an advantage to manufacturers, retailers and foodservice operators looking to future-proof their business as the food industry as a whole comes under increased scrutiny, whatever Brexit may bring.