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

While the UK Government maintains that public health and confidence in food standards will remain the highest priority for post-Brexit trade deals, 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.

Is imported American chicken safe to eat?

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

And yet, the use of pathogen reduction treatments (PRTs) that is common among American meat manufacturers has sparked debate over ‘dropping standards’ in food supply chains in order to pursue post-Brexit trade deals between the UK and the United States.

While chlorine may not necessarily cause harm to consumers, it may not be doing the job it’s supposed to; the method is believed to be an effective and economical way of protecting consumers from salmonella and campylobacter, but recent studies carried out on chicken and spinach at the University of Southampton indicated that chlorine washing is not guaranteed to kill pathogens.
Environmental impact

Despite the general acceptance that imported American poultry would not necessarily pose a great threat to the health of UK consumers, ‘chlorinated chicken’ has become a byword for public concerns over the safety, quality and integrity of food supply chains as the UK prepares to draw up new international trading agreements outside of the European Union.
There remains a degree of concern over the impact of chlorinated water on the environment, as well as the human impact on factory workers; 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”.

“Woefully deficient welfare”

But the primary concern for many politicians and representatives of the British farming industry is the lowering of animal welfare standards.

British MP George Eustice, a supporter of Brexit and the former minister for agriculture until his resignation in March, has cited “woefully deficient” legislation for animal welfare as a principal reason for avoiding US meat imports.

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

Despite his strong desire to see new trade deals being struck, Eustice encouraged the UK to demand that suppliers meet British standards – a potentially difficult task, given his analysis of on-farm welfare and slaughterhouse standards in the US as “patchy” at the state level, with “virtually nothing” at a
federal level.

What else could change?

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.

Founded in 1946, the charity has campaigned to oppose intensive farming, support local purchasing and increase public education on nutrition, as well the certification of organic food. Their most recent “food risk list” outlines their top ten concerns relating to American food imports.

The Soil Association “Risk List”:

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.

Source: Institute for Public Policy and Research

Food poisoning: Incidences of food poisoning in the US effect 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.

Read more:

https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/mar/06/us-ambassador-dismisses-uk-criticism-over-food-standards
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47440562