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Future of Britain Project

Online Deliberation June 2019

Expert Responses to Questions about Food

This pack has been written for attendees of the online deliberative polling event that was held in June 2019. It contains answers to questions about food that were not addressed in the plenary secessions, due to time constraints. The questions have been answered by one of our food experts and are grouped under broad subject headings:

- GMOs
- Chlorinated Chicken etc.
- Live Exports
- Glyphosphate
- Protected Origin Foods
- Farm Payments/Agricultural Policy
- Miscellaneous

GMOs

What is the government's likely long term position / policy on GM food?

The answer to this question is likely to depend on what kind of Brexit we end up with and what kind of trade deals we pursue. There have been suggestions from members of current governing party that they would like to see looser regulations to facilitate the growth of the domestic biotech industry. It is likely that any trade deal with the US will require a less stringent approach to risk regulation and the interpretation of the precautionary principles that exists within the EU.

What does the NFU think about GMO crops?

The NFU believes British farmers should have the choice to access the best tools and technologies to run competitive businesses and provide a safe and affordable supply of food. As long as the science shows a particular technology to be safe, then we believe farmers should have access to it. While GM technology remains controversial in the UK (and the EU), it is widely used elsewhere in the world. Indeed, evidence is increasingly showing that there can be positive economic and environmental impacts from cultivating GM crops. It is regretful that British farmers are unable to test these potential benefits themselves and decide whether they wish to grow GM crops themselves.

Would loosening the rules on GMOs be a 'one-way ticket'? Would we be able to reverse it?

In principle it is not a one-way ticket. But the answer to this question depends upon how and why we loosen the rules. If we loosen rules for reasons of trade it would be difficult to tighten again unless there was clear evidence of, for example harm to human health or the environment. Loosening and then tightening could end up damaging trade relations with key partners from both sides of the GMOs debate.

What can you say about reduction of the use of pesticides vs biodiversity using GM crops?

There is an argument that using GM crops could lead to a reduction in the use of conventional pesticides, as crops can be engineered to be resistant to certain pests. For example, a study published in 2013 found that the use of pesticides (insecticides) declined with the uptake of a GMO crop resistant to certain type of corn-pest. However, the development of herbicide resistant GMOs has led to cross-contamination with non-GMO plants (weeds) leading to increases in the application of herbicides (in this case glyphosate). So, the picture is complex and depends upon whether you are looking at pesticides (insecticides) or herbicides.

Which countries does the UK currently trade with in relation to GMO items, and how would these trade arrangements be affected by a ban of GMOs?

The answer to this question is not readily available.

Chlorinated Chicken etc

What are the long-term effects of eating chlorinated chicken [and GMO products?] What evidence is there for the health impacts of chlorinated chicken, hormone treated beef, glyphosate, etc?

For chlorinated chicken the European Food Safety Authority found no clear indication that long term chlorination has negative health impacts – the EU's primary justification for its policies are to encourage better practice along the food production chain: there is a concern that using Pathogen Reduction Treatments (PRTs) (such as chlorination) may reduce good practice in the production and slaughtering of chickens.

For beef there has been a long-running dispute over the scientific evidence between the EU and the US. The EU found that the hormones used had potentially negative health implications, which was accepted by the World Trade Organisation.

See briefing by Millstone and Lang:

<https://foodresearch.org.uk/publications/hormone-treated-beef-should-britain-accept-it-after-brexit/>

On Glyphosate as indicated in the briefing the ECHA and EFSA have both indicated that glyphosate is safe to use. The International Agency for Research on Cancer found it was a carcinogen but the EFSA and ECHA have carried out a risk evaluation of whether its correct usage will lead to negative health impacts and found it safe to use i.e. there are lots of substances that *may* cause cancer but what is important is the risk that they will cause cancer.

What are the benefits of chlorinated chicken and hormone treated beef, and if there are any downsides?

The key benefits of treating animal products with pathogen reduction agents (Chlorine) is that it is deemed to be an efficient way of killing germs which can cause food poisoning. Hormone treating beef leads the cattle to grow more rapidly.

In both cases there are potential welfare and food production concerns about the use of these substances as they are linked with more intensive farming methods.

Is there any benefit to consumers to allow the import of chlorinated chicken and hormone treated beef?

It is likely that such food would be imported from countries that process these foods on a larger scale and to lower standards, so the costs of food would be lower.

Why do some scientists say chlorinated chicken is safe to eat, whereas others say it is carcinogenic? Who do we believe?

The EFSA has found after numerous tests that it is safe to eat on the basis of the available evidence and data. But the EFSA also suggests that there are other reasons to avoid this approach to animal husbandry and food production.

Live Exports

Why hasn't export of live animals been banned?

The government has stated that under EU rules it cannot ban the export of live animals.

What are the current standards for importing live animals, and what is the evidence around its impact on human and animal health?

There are clear EU regulations on the amount of space the animals have, and their access to feed and water, together with requirements to stop en route. A review of those regulations in 2011 found that they had been beneficial but that there were still on-going issues with failure to implement them properly. As a result, the welfare of some animals continued to be compromised

What countries take in the live exports? Are there existing limits on these exports?

We are not aware of any legal limits on the countries to which live animals may be exported. In practice, animals that are being exported for slaughter or further rearing are mostly only exported to countries close to the UK. Animals exported for breeding (generally a small proportion of total exports) are more likely to travel longer distances.

If we were to ban export of live animals, would that be against WTO rules?

This is uncertain – there is scope to do so – and to justify on welfare and environmental grounds – but it is unclear whether that would be successful.

See House of Commons Library Briefing:

<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8031>

Protected Origin Foods

How much would it cost to keep our 61 designated products? Who is to cover the cost?

This is still to be decided. It depends on negotiations and the nature of future trade deals with the EU. It is likely to be the producers themselves who would pay.

Glyphosphate

What bodies regulate glyphosphate - are there national organisations as well as EU institutions?

The EU agencies work with national authorities and experts to carry out risk assessments before releasing chemicals onto the market. National agencies take it in turn to act as teams evaluating evidence. So, the UK does have the scope to do this but the amount of work its agency will have to undertake after Brexit will increase.

Farm Payments/Agricultural Policy

How can we ensure that future policies will address both the economic and environmental impacts of farming?

By designing the new payments scheme appropriately, which is what Defra is currently working on.

What gov't plans are there to provide support for less profitable farms / farmers?

Most of what we know about the government's current plans are contained in the policy statements accompanying the Agriculture Bill and in response to the Health and Harmony consultation. The centerpiece would be the payment of money in return for public goods (so primarily environmental measures). This would not take into account the profitability of farms, but simply reward those farms that deliver public goods. However, there has been an acknowledgement that farms in poorer regions and those which are less profitable due to geographical constraints (e.g. uplands and hill farming) may need specific support. However, no details have yet been forthcoming.

Could we divert current subsidy payments to measures to increase farm efficiency?

In principle. Yes, although one argument would be that if you want to improve farm efficiency you remove subsidies altogether.

The government has said that it wants to improve productivity (which essentially means efficiency) as part of its future policy (something the NFU supports) but the details are still being developed. This would go alongside the provision of financial assistance for delivering "public goods".

If we are subsidising farmers to provide staples for UK use and also exporting and importing these same staples - how does this work? And should we be selling abroad?

The answer to this question depends on what your preferences are and where the markets for your products are. On whether we should be selling abroad – should morally or economically or practically? It depends.

Miscellaneous

Who is going to be regulating the safety of food coming into the UK after Brexit?

The UK Food Standards Agency, which currently works in cooperation with the European Food Standards Agency at EU level, will take this role on.

After Brexit, when negotiating a new trade deal with other countries, how much of a say will British people have on whether food we are eating has GMO's in or is hormone treated etc?

The general public tends to have a limited say in the content of trade deals but can exercise power as consumers. Depending on what kind of deal is negotiated and whether such foods have to be labelled, consumers can choose either to buy or not to buy such products. A key risk though is that domestic and/or higher quality producers become uncompetitive so the choice to the consumer is reduced. It is also debatable as to the extent to which, in practice, UK consumers pay attention to how the food they buy is produced, either because they pay limited attention to labelling in shops, or because such information is not freely available (i.e. when “eating out”).

What powers do the WTO have if countries break rulings?

Essentially the WTO represents an international agreement between the member countries. If one member “breaks the rules”, it will only be pursued if another country decides to press the matter (i.e. they believe that it's in their interests to do so). If they do, then a lengthy dispute process is launched, and eventually it may result in a ruling against the transgressing country – that could mean a requirement they stop the offending behaviour, or they offer alternative concessions to the harmed country to remedy the damage they have suffered. It should be noted that the dispute process is currently under threat (and so the very operability of the WTO) due to wrecking tactics being used by the US to block the appointment of judges to the WTO's appellate body.

If we were to no longer benefit from the EU research in food and regulation, is the UK government willing to support its own research projects?

Hopefully! The indications are that, yes, it will but may also seek to continue cooperating with the EU as there are economies of scale that can be realized from doing so. Here the question becomes one of money – if the UK wants to continue to access EU agencies it will need to pay to do so.

What can we do to ensure the quality control in other countries from which we import the food matches our standard? Where do UK standards stand compared to other countries.

On food there are minimum standards, regulated via the WTO, to which all states adhere. We can impose additional requirements (regulations) for imports into the UK, but in doing so run the risk that we cannot secure trade deals or that we are unable to benefit from food produced more cheaply elsewhere.

The quality of products is tested in a variety of ways to ensure they meet UK standards and products that do not do so can be reported to the Trading Standards Association.

What reasons are there for local products being more expensive than some products from other countries - how can governments focus more on local food production?

There are a range of factors that shape price: labour costs, regulations on how to produce food and the type of substance you can use, and scale of production. Countries with cheaper labour, lower standards and/or bigger/larger scale farming and manufacturing can produce at lower cost. The typical way that governments encourage local production is through payment support of some kind.

What can we do about the use of palm oil - why is it so widely used, is it only because it is a cost saver?

There is a risk that in moving away from palm oil that a new substance is used that is also environmentally damaging, so it may be better to emphasise the need for palm oil to be produced sustainably. It is used widely because it works well within cosmetic products and food, is cheap, and palms are relatively quick to grow.

What do you think about farming in antibiotics, especially considering the rise of antibiotics resistance?

There is a strong case to limit use of antibiotics in farming. However, there is also a need to guarantee the welfare of animals and this will sometimes mean using medications including antibiotics.