

## The Future of An Anglo-American Trade Deal

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Currently, with the UK's exit from the EU, British [politicians have been identifying an opportunity](#) to 'pivot' towards America and pursue a US/UK trade deal. Prime Minister Johnson has repeatedly touted the potential of a trade deal with the US. He seems to believe that by pivoting away from Europe, the UK can build a stronger alliance with the US and increase transatlantic trade. He is hoping that his good friend, President Donald Trump, who prides himself on his ability as a 'dealmaker', will help smooth the way and get the deal done.

The urgency that Johnson is pursuing in this potential deal is underscored by the number of trips that he and others in his Cabinet have planned in the coming months. Already this summer, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab and Secretary of International Trade, Liz Truss, have visited Washington. Their hope is that increasing US/UK trade will help to mitigate the potential loss of our European exports and imports, which could be even more significant in the case of a no-deal Brexit.

It would seem that the US are similarly keen to establish a new trade deal. President Trump previously told reporters, "[We're working already on a trade agreement. And I think it'll be a very substantial trade agreement](#)", and earlier this summer, the President sent his then National Security Advisor, John Bolton, to the UK to further those conversations. During his visit, Bolton (who has subsequently been fired by President Trump) said that the UK was "[first-in-line](#)" for a deal with the US and claimed that [sector-specific agreements](#) could be approved in order to streamline and speed up the process. This would mean that the US and the UK would (for example) agree a trade agreement on manufacturing, before moving onto an agreement on financial services, progressively moving down the list until all sectors had been covered.

### What might an US/UK trade agreement on agriculture look like?

Currently, around [30% of all food consumed in the UK is imported from the EU](#). In 2016, more than [£30.3 billion of Britain's food imports and £12.3 billion of its food exports](#) were with the EU, totalling almost [£1,300](#) of trade every second. In comparison, US agricultural exports to the United Kingdom totalled £1.65 billion in 2018 with the main categories being wine and beer ([£216 million](#)) and tree nuts ([£163 million](#)). In the opposite direction, the UK exported [£682 million](#) of agricultural products to the US in 2018. Leading categories included snack foods ([£98 million](#)) and cheese ([£49 million](#)).

Part of the reason why trade in agriculture products between the US and the UK has not been higher in the past is the regulatory differences between the US and the EU. Currently, as a member of the EU, there exists significant legal barriers that prohibit specific US food products from entering the UK market. This includes the much-hyped chlorinated chicken. However, [current restrictions](#) also apply to imports of other products.

An [estimated 60-80% of US pigs](#) are fed the beta agonist drug, [ractopamine](#), prior to slaughter. The treatment increases [protein synthesis](#), resulting in increased muscle fibre size, weight gain, improved feed efficiency and increased carcass leanness. However, ractopamine has been found to cause [serious disability in animals](#), including trembling, broken limbs and an inability to walk. It has subsequently [been banned by the EU since 1996](#). Another concern would be [azodicarbonamide \(ADA\)](#), which is used in the US as a bleaching agent for cereal flour and a dough conditioner in baking. However, ADA is [banned in the EU](#) because, during baking, ADA [breaks down](#) to form a number of different chemicals, including [semicarbizide \(SEM\)](#) that has been found to [increase the incidence of tumours](#) in lab rats. It is through practices like these that large-scale food producers in the US are able to reduce the cost of their products and achieve vastly higher yields.

The EU decided to restrict the sale of these products, and a significant number of other food products and farming methods, on the basis on the '[Precautionary Principle](#)' that protects EU consumers by requiring that companies irrevocably prove that no harm will be done. Over the past few decades, the Principle has

significantly hindered the ability of producers in the US to sell into an EU market, particularly with regards to GM crops. President Trump acknowledged this (in his own way) when he said: [“We were actually impeded by their relationship with the European Union. We were very much impeded on trade. And I think we can do three to four or five times what we’re doing.”](#)

## **Trumping the Negotiations**

The sentiment that US is being obstructed by the EU’s Precautionary Principle would make it a likely target for post-Brexit trade negotiations. President Trump could use the UK’s weak negotiating position and Boris Johnson’s stated desire for a US/UK deal to demand that the Principle be watered down (or entirely removed) post-Brexit. The goal of the US to compel the UK to drop the Precautionary Principle in favour of a [“science-based approach”](#) could see GM crops, hormone-treated beef and acid-washed chicken carcasses enter the UK market unimpeded.

The [US Trade Representative \(USTR\)](#) have already published their demands for a US/UK trade deal, which specifically insists on comprehensive market access for US agricultural products. In a document outlining their negotiating objectives, the USTR said specifically that the US wanted the UK to, [“Establish a mechanism to remove expeditiously unwarranted barriers that block the export of U.S. food and agricultural products in order to obtain more open, equitable, and reciprocal market access.”](#) Despite public concern, the UK might have little option but to accept the demands laid out by the US – especially if we’re desperate for friends after crashing out on a no-deal Brexit.

## **What that means for the UK**

The impact of watering down (or removing) the Precautionary Principle to meet the USTR demands would impact both UK consumers and producers. Consumers have been clear that they do not want acid-washed chickens due to the poor animal welfare standards that are associated with it – [68% of UK consumers](#) aren’t comfortable with eating chicken that has been washed with chlorine. Similarly, [GM food has long been rejected by UK consumers](#). However, adopting a new trade deal with lower food safety standards could also see ultra-processed foods flooding the UK market, allowing multinational food companies and fast-food chains to introduce unhealthy products at a low cost. Such was the case in Canada when it signed up to the [North American Free Trade Agreement \(NAFTA\)](#), which resulted in a sharp decline in the price of high fructose corn syrup, which was then incorporated into popular ultra-processed foods, [aggravating the obesity epidemic](#).

A poorly designed free trade agreement with the US could also negatively impact the ability of UK farmers to compete. If cheap, industrial US food was allowed to enter the UK market without restraint, there could potentially be disastrous consequences for UK farmers, animal welfare and the environment. Consequently, the SFT has been advocating that any future US/UK trade deal maintains a level playing field and guarantees the highest food safety standards. We were supporting the amendment to the Agriculture Bill that was tabled by Kerry McCarthy MP (Labour – Bristol East). Her proposal aims to ensure that the UK Government cannot enter into any international trade agreements that allow food to be imported into the UK which does not meet the UK’s standards on food safety, environmental protection and animal welfare. The goal of this amendment is to protect the UK consumer from poor quality imports and to allow UK farming to remain competitive, rather than seeing UK agriculture undercut by foreign food. However, following the prorogation of Parliament this week, the future of the Agriculture Bill is in increasingly uncertain. We will continue to work with MPs from all parties to highlight the importance of maintaining food safety standards in any future trade deal.

## **American Agroecology**

That said, there are truly excellent and inspiring farmers in the US, who have strong environmental and ethical beliefs embedded in their farming practices. Farmers like John Wick at the [Marin Carbon Project](#), Will Allen

at [Cedar Circle Farm](#) and [Cory Carmen at Carmen Ranch](#), all of whom farm in a holistic and harmonious way and stay within planetary boundaries. These farmers (and others like them) cannot be conflated with the vast landscapes of corn and soy monocultures that cover the Mid-West. Nor the factory farms with thousands of chickens stuffed inside overheated warehouses.

The potential problem posed by a trade deal between the US and the UK is that international free trade agreements are designed to benefit transnational agribusinesses that are large enough to benefit from the economies of scale. It is companies like Mondelez, Danone and Mars that have the global reach to benefit from these agreements, in a way that small- and mid-scale farmers cannot. These companies have the resources to ship huge quantities of food around the world and sell products through global supermarket supply chains, in a way that a small, local producer cannot. Consequently, a free trade deal with the UK would negatively impact agroecological farmers in the US, as well as in the UK.

### **Global Future of Sustainable Farming**

'American' food shouldn't be demonised as the epitome of ultra-processed, poor-quality food. Instead, it's important to celebrate and collaborate with small local producers around the world who are working for a better and more sustainable future. The global agroecological movement should join together to advocate for an international trade policy that supports farmers who use environmentally sound practices in their farming systems. The Sustainable Food Trust recognise that we are in a globalised world where products are traded internationally, and we would not advocate for a protectionist approach. However, we want a system where small-scale farmers can earn a living producing food sustainably.

To achieve this sustainable future, a new economic approach is needed, that values and supports sustainable farming around the world. The current global economic model means that most farmers have no option but to employ agricultural practices that do not serve the public interest and that put them at the mercy of commodity agriculture. Governments around the world need to unlock the barriers to change. Through collaborative advocacy, the global agroecological movement aims to build momentum behind a new economic and international trade system where farmers are financially supported for adopting sustainable practices, farming within planetary limits and enhancing their local food system.

Consequently, the UK should aim to produce and export food with high animal welfare and environmental standards, which provide clear provenance, promote agroecological production (as in organic and regenerative systems), strengthen geographic indicators ([PGI/PDO](#)) and sustainable supply chains. Defra has [repeatedly supported](#) the adoption of higher animal welfare standards and an agricultural support system that gives 'public money for public goods'. This approach could work in the UK's favour on the international market. Instead of engaging in a race to the bottom for cheaper and cheaper food, let's create an agroecological future of UK food exports that is based on good quality and elevated standards.