

Submitted to scrutiny@parliament.uk:

House of Commons Public Bill Committee:

Agriculture Bill 2017-19

1. Summary

2. The British Poultry Council (BPC) welcomes the introduction of the Agriculture Bill by Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Ensuring a secure supply of food that helps maintain the UK's sovereign capability to feed itself is a national security issue – It needs to be underpinned by a healthy and competitive agriculture and food sector.
3. Our overarching message regards the importance of aligning agriculture and food production with people actually being fed, and that all people in this country must have access to affordable and nutritious food. The growing food poverty and food insecurity in this country should not be accepted by society. We must measure and understand the causes of food insecurity, and in doing so devise ways in which food supply chains in this country can help to provide a solution. It is essential that the Agriculture Bill maintains a strong link between food production and the ability of people to eat.
4. Our standards are already world-class and the underpinning legislation on areas such as animal welfare and environmental protection is the most stringent it has ever been. Assurance Schemes then compliment the Regulations to allow for the introduction of science and technology improvements more rapidly than legislation can change. How we value our food must be defended against lower standard imports, even as we strive to improve and develop our own practices.
5. Labelling of food is a crucial part of the defence of our standards, for food safety, quality, provenance, and nutrition. Assurance Schemes can provide a useful catch-all for a great deal of information, e.g. the Red Tractor signifies, among many other things, that poultry has been stunned prior to slaughter.
6. The Agriculture Bill must be the first part of an integrated food strategy for the UK that covers the entire chain of both production and use. Such a strategy must work for the most vulnerable in our society, for public procurement in schools and hospitals, and for the average person on the high street. Food and feeding people should always work from those most in need, and British food producers can help deliver that vision.
7. This note contains comments on the scope, provisions, and powers of the Agriculture Bill pertinent to the British poultry meat sector.

8. Scope of the Agriculture Bill

9. The poultry meat sector is not part of CAP or any other subsidy scheme and is market-driven. As such, it has grown and thrived entirely on its own merits and now poultry meat represents half the meat eaten in the UK. The sector's supply chains are short and integrated, are flexible to changes in the marketplace and consumer demand, contain innovation and technology, and have world-class standards of production.
10. The scope of the Bill is not aimed at a market-driven sector such as ours, but in re-focusing financial assistance on 'outcomes' and 'benefits' our member companies would be eligible for such support. Therefore, it introduces a new level of fairness that is welcome.
11. We hold a general concern that financial assistance by Government can cause imbalance in the marketplace, does nothing to promote investment and innovation, and stunts the development of sustainable supply chains.
12. Many of the elements described as being eligible for financial assistance should, in a fair marketplace, be funded through the price paid by the end consumer. For example, environmental impact should be minimised and mitigated as part of responsible business practices and not as an optional add-on that attracts Government funding.
13. We hold similar concerns about exemptions from competition law and that this undermines a healthy marketplace.
14. The scope of the Bill is limited and makes no mention of the output of agriculture, which is food for UK citizens. British consumers benefit from unprecedented choice and affordability of food, but this is partially supported by Government support (CAP or its proposed replacement). The cost of food production is likely to increase after Brexit and no amount of financial assistance for public goods will insulate consumers from food price rises. The Bill should at least acknowledge the importance of British food production and the world-class standards to which it currently operates.

15. Provisions of the Agriculture Bill

16. Financial assistance should not be available for those activities that should be done anyway, be that for regulatory or ethical reasons. For example, health and welfare of animals are priorities for any livestock sector that should be implemented to an already high standard. The wellbeing of livestock represents an ethical as well as commercial benefit. Similarly, environmental requirements are already well covered by legislation.
17. Where financial assistance could bring benefit is through innovation, technology, and productivity. The science behind all of these must be robust in order to drive practices forward, and Government could support bringing new ideas and technology from concept to commercial viability. For example, biomass heating in our sector began as a way to dispose of poultry litter in an efficient way, but it also creates a dry heat that has improved the health of birds. This additional benefit wasn't fully appreciated until the technology became commercially viable.
18. Disease is another area where financial assistance could be beneficial. The Bill mentions endemic disease but preventing and responding to exotic disease is just as important. Avian influenza still has the potential to devastate the UK poultry industry, and Government support and resources prior to and during an outbreak is crucial.

19. We support the collection and sharing of data under the restrictions as described in the Bill.
20. We would urge caution in any potential deviation from EU marketing standards, as this will affect the ability to trade with EU member states. It is essential that the UK retains equivalence with EU regulations, as the EU is and should remain our biggest trading partner.
21. We are very cautious about Producer Organisations and exemptions from competition law. It is unclear from the Bill as to against who a PO is to improve competitiveness. In any group of primary producers their main competition is likely to be each other. As a trade association we are all too aware of the need to maintain a clear line where collective interests end, and commercial interests begin.
22. Groups of producers working together is essential, such as in setting standards or addressing sector wide challenges, but direct support for competitiveness reasons is going too far.

23. Powers of the Agriculture Bill

24. The powers stated in the Bill appear proportionate to the provisions laid out. However, we are concerned that equivalence with EU regulation be maintained and not abandoned without careful consideration and science-based evidence.

25. Feeding the nation after Brexit

26. We believe that this bill should require the Government to monitor and report on food security in some form. As outlined in the Government's Health and Harmony policy paper earlier this year, achieving food security relies on maintaining a "strong domestic production base" and access "to safe, high-quality imports" post-Brexit.
27. Everyone deserves dignity in how they access food: to have a choice of food, to have the information to make that choice, and to be able to afford to implement that choice. When any one of those factors – choice, information, affordability – fails, then none of them are attainable and dignity is not possible.
28. This triumvirate must apply to those in food poverty as much as it does at the other end of the scale, and good animal welfare should be a constant across them all. If it does not then animal welfare or public goods will become a status symbol of the food-elite, and not available to those who struggle to access good quality food.
29. The UK already has excellent food standards, and these should be valued more highly than they currently seem to be. We need to defend and support these standards without forgetting they provide food that is affordable and available.

30. Annex: About the British poultry meat sector

31. The British Poultry Council is the voice of the British poultry meat sector and the trade association for producers of poultry meat from chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese. British poultry meat means a secure supply, it means knowing where our food comes from, and it means standards everyone can trust. Our Standards, through the Red Tractor Assurance Scheme, cover all aspects of production and are independently audited.

32. The British poultry meat sector's contribution towards feeding the nation is critical to our national food security, and prosperity of our wider economy. Our sector has a reputation for producing safe, wholesome and nutritious food, which is underpinned by our 'Great British Food Values'. It's our values that ensure our food is affordable and available; has high standards of animal health and welfare; respects the environment; and has a sustainable and secure supply. We are conscious of our place in society, and the responsibility that comes with it.
33. Brexit is giving us an opportunity to re-focus our food system and stimulate investment to produce more British Food. This is our chance to re-define our Britishness, to say boldly that our first choice is British, and highlight the benefits that it brings; in jobs, the economy, and in our communities. Our sector is committed to increasing our productivity, investing in new infrastructure, and increasing automation to bring greater levels of growth in skilled roles.
34. Nearly one-billion birds are reared for food every year, providing half the meat that the country eats.
35. The UK is 65% self-sufficient in poultry meat. We import £2 billion worth of poultry meat each year, and export poultry meat worth £340 million; three-quarters of which is with EU Member States. Exports of breeding stock around the world are worth an additional £140 million.
36. We are not part of CAP or other subsidies and yet offer over £1 billion in tax contribution to the Exchequer.
37. Our economic contribution has increased by nearly 50 percent in the last five years with a £5 billion gross value-added contribution to GDP in 2016 and our sector sustains a total of 87,700 jobs, of these, 37,200 people are employed directly.

38. Contact

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