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UK's lack of readiness to regulate pesticides post-Brexit poses major risks to environment and human health

The United Kingdom is woefully unprepared to regulate pesticide use after Brexit, says a [new briefing paper](#) from the Food Research Collaboration and Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK).

The briefing paper, written by Josie Cohen, Nick Mole and Keith Tyrell at PAN UK, points out that the UK could lose access to the European Union's array of institutions and expertise to regulate pesticides after Brexit, leaving its ability to protect human health, wildlife and the natural environment greatly diminished.

A looming 'governance gap'

Crucial roles currently performed by EU bodies include deciding which pesticides can be used in the UK and setting the levels of pesticide residues permitted to appear in food. The European system also provides much-needed scientific support and incorporates a number of important checks and balances designed to ensure that decisions on pesticides are made transparently and independent from the vested interests of the pesticide industry. Despite assurances in the recent Draft Withdrawal Agreement that the UK will remain aligned with EU pesticide decisions until the end of the transition period, there is no clarity on what will happen afterwards.

Josie Cohen, Head of Policy and Campaigns at PAN UK, said:

'The UK will either need to create new institutions and bodies that can fill this 'governance gap' after Brexit or at least ensure that there are systems and staff in place to fulfil the functions previously carried out by EU bodies. The Government urgently needs to invest in ensuring that, post transition period, the UK system is fit-for-purpose. Otherwise it risks a major weakening of UK pesticide standards, which would enable a greater variety of hazardous pesticides to be used in larger quantities.'

Trade deals risk weakening pesticide rules

The briefing also reveals how future trade deals could undermine UK pesticide standards after Brexit. The UK government is already under pressure from pro-pesticide lobby groups and countries with weaker protections to slash pesticide regulations. A future trade deal with the US in particular – where almost three times the number of active substances¹ are authorised for use than in the UK – threatens to allow the use of carcinogens and other substances of high toxicological concern, as well as the import of food with higher residue levels.

Nick Mole, Policy Officer at PAN UK explained:

'A future trade deal with the US is highly concerning since we have seen how the US Government has attacked the EU's high pesticide standards in previous trade negotiations. The EU has had the power and negotiating experience to resist these attempts, but whether the UK will be able to do the same is highly questionable. If the Government is serious about delivering a 'Green Brexit', then it must ensure that no weakening of standards occurs through trade deals with non-EU countries.'

The authors argue that upholding pesticide standards is key if the UK wants to continue exporting agricultural products to the EU, its biggest market². To maintain current levels of trade, the UK must ensure that it complies with the residue limits for pesticides set by the EU.

An opportunity to adopt tried-and-tested alternatives

In the long term the UK should maintain the EU's approach to pesticide regulation, banning active substances that are judged to be intrinsically dangerous, the paper argues. In addition to mirroring the EU regime, the authors highlight that the UK government should take the unique opportunity presented by Brexit to adopt additional measures which have been proven to reduce pesticide use in other countries, namely a pesticide reduction target, a pesticide tax and the establishment of a body designed to assist farmers to switch to non-chemical alternatives to pesticides.

There is a strong preference among voters, both Leave and Remain, to retain the EU's pesticide standards. In fact, a majority of UK citizens want fewer pesticides in their food, farms and feed post-Brexit².

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Notes to editors:

1. An active substance is the chemically active part of a manufactured pesticide product. For example, glyphosate is the active substance found in the pesticide product RoundUp.
2. The EU provides the UK's largest agricultural export market and, in 2017, 60% of UK food, feed and drink exports went to the EU. This is based on UK government statistics – see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/741062/AUK-2017-18sep18.pdf (page 97, point 8)
3. 63% of people want to keep EU regulations on pesticides, compared to just 16% who wanted them relaxed. Polling commissioned by PAN UK and SumOfUs and conducted by GQR Research, September 2017, <https://gqrr.app.box.com/s/0ddbifc853j9k1t1sbjvuc1crvxw8zbc>
4. PAN UK is the only UK charity focused on tackling the problems caused by pesticides and promoting safe and sustainable alternatives in agriculture, urban areas, homes and gardens.
5. The Food Research Collaboration is a UK initiative that links academics and civil society organisations to help develop food policy that supports healthy, equitable and sustainable food systems. This Briefing is part of its Brexit workstream: <http://foodresearch.org.uk/workstream-1/>