

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 9 JUNE 2021

New Pacific free trade agreement could bring 119 banned toxic pesticides to UK

The UK could be opening the door to 119 pesticides banned for health and environmental reasons, warns a new report looking at implications of signing up to a Pacific free trade agreement. The deal with 11 countries, including Australia, Canada and Mexico (1), risks exposing UK consumers and wildlife to a new suite of toxic pesticides.

New YouGov polling reveals two-thirds of the British public are worried about negative health (68%) and environmental (67%) impacts of lowering of UK pesticide standards by joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade agreement. The UK formally applied to join the agreement on 1 February but membership is far from a done deal.

The new report, which is part of the Toxic Trade series authored by Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK), Sustain and trade expert Dr Emily Lydgate, reveals that the deal poses a direct threat to the British public's health, environment and farming sector. It would also set a dangerous precedent that UK pesticide and environmental standards are up for grabs in other post-Brexit trade negotiations.

Josie Cohen, Head of Policy and Campaigns at PAN UK, said: *"This flies in the face of Government promises not to sign a trade deal which compromises UK environmental protection and food standards. After all the warm words, it looks like the UK-Australia trade deal will finally reveal which standards the Government is willing to fight for. Any weakening of pesticide standards in an Australia deal makes it all but inevitable we will do the same with the CPTPP, allowing sub-standard imports from 11 countries."*

Though far from perfect, the UK's pesticide standards are far more robust than those of existing CPTPP members.

The deal could unleash a wave of food imports containing pesticides that are currently banned from appearing in UK food for health reasons. These include the fungicide triadimefon, which has links to cancer and is classified as a developmental or reproductive toxin, meaning that it negatively affects sexual function and fertility. It is allowed to appear in food produced in CPTPP members Australia, Chile and Peru. UK consumers could also soon find themselves exposed to the insecticide chlorpyrifos, which has been shown to negatively affect the cognitive development of fetuses and young children.

UK bans on notorious bee-harming neonicotinoids and water-polluting herbicides and insecticides could be reversed due to pressure from CPTPP member countries, where they are still in use.

Foods such as apples, grapes, wheat, asparagus avocados and blueberries grown in CPTPP countries are also allowed to contain much higher amounts of toxic pesticides than their UK equivalents. For example:

- Australian grapes can contain 6,000 times the amount of the fungicide iprodione than UK grapes. Iprodione is linked to cancer and is a suspected endocrine disrupter, which means it is capable of interfering with hormone systems which can lead to birth defects and developmental disorders.
- Canadian wheat is allowed to contain 100 times the amount of the herbicide diuron than UK wheat. Diuron is a suspected endocrine disruptor with links to cancer. It can also negatively impact sexual function and fertility.

The new YouGov polling reveals over half (57%) of the British public want the UK Government to stand firm on pesticide standards, even if that means the UK is unable to join the CPTPP.

The report emphasises that CPTPP is a done deal, already agreed by 11 members. By joining, the UK would surrender its power to write the rules, with virtually no scope to amend the treaty to prevent the undermining of UK pesticide standards.

Dr Emily Lydgate, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Law at the University of Sussex, said: *“As the UK signs this deal, it must make clear its pesticide standards aren’t on the table. If not, it will find itself on a slippery slope. By breaking with its long-held precautionary approach and agreeing to weaker pesticide standards under CPTPP, the UK would be much more likely to bow to similar demands from other trading partners.”*

For UK farmers, the report highlights that the deal could spell disaster. It risks cheap food imports produced to weaker pesticide standards flooding the domestic market, undermining UK farmers’ competitiveness. And if the UK weakens its pesticides regime due to joining the CPTPP, farmers will lose their largest export market as UK produce will no longer meet EU standards.

Vicki Hird, Head of Sustainable Farming at Sustain, said: *“The Government has talked a strong game on standing up for the UK farming sector post Brexit, but actions speak louder than words. With the CPTPP deal, the Government is selling farmers down the river. It would be a disastrous double whammy, potentially hitting both their domestic market and the majority of imports – to the EU.”*

Key recommendations for the UK government:

- Do not allow any weakening of its pesticide standards via CPTPP, including resisting all pressure during the accession process.
- Prevent UK farmers from being disadvantaged by cheap food imports produced to weaker pesticide standards in CPTPP member countries.
- Ensure that decision to ratify joining CPTPP takes place in the open, with the opportunity for full parliamentary and public scrutiny.

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Notes to editors

- 1) The CPTPP has eleven member countries spanning Latin America (Chile, Mexico and Peru), Asia (Brunei Darussalam, Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam), Australasia (Australia and New Zealand) and North America (Canada).
- 2) All polling figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,713 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th – 8th May 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). Full polling results are available on request.
- 3) This briefing is part of the Toxic Trade series which looks at the potential impact of post-Brexit trade deals on UK pesticide standards. “Toxic Trade: How trade deals threaten to weaken UK pesticide standards” (June 2020) looks specifically at future UK trade deals with the USA, Australia and India. For further information on these FTAs, or on pesticides and trade more broadly, visit: <https://www.pan-uk.org/toxic-trade/>