Brexit and pesticides: UK food and agriculture at a crossroads

Brexit has the potential to drastically reshape the UK's relationship with pesticides. For decades, the way the UK regulates and uses pesticides has been largely decided at the European level. Although far from perfect, the EU's pesticide regulatory regime is widely considered to be the strongest in the world in terms of protecting human health and the environment from the harmful impacts of pesticides.

With Brexit looming, the UK has a major decision to make. It could choose to mirror the relatively high pesticide standards of the EU, and perhaps go further by introducing additional measures to reduce pesticide use and the associated harms to health and environment. However, there is a real danger that the Government will instead bow to the pro-pesticide lobby and use Brexit as a chance to deregulate, allowing a greater variety of harmful pesticides to be used on UK farms and enabling pesticides to be present in larger quantities in both domestically grown and imported food.

A report launched in December by PAN UK and the Food Research Collaboration explores the various paths the UK could choose to follow as it grapples with this dilemma. It considers not only whether the UK's existing regulatory regime for pesticides is fit for purpose, but also whether the British Government has the capacity and readiness to take on the various roles that EU institutions currently play to ensure the system works.

While initial concern regarding how Brexit would affect UK pesticide standards focussed on the loss of EU laws and regulations, it has become increasingly clear that the so-called 'governance gap' poses an even bigger threat. The key pieces of EU pesticide legislation will be transposed into UK law via the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, but the institutions, capacity and expertise required to implement them may take years to develop. In particular, the UK is losing the scientific support and advice currently provided by the European Food Safety Authority, as well as a range of important checks and balances conducted by EU institutions, which play a crucial scrutiny role to ensure that decisions are unbiased and do not yield to the vested interests of the pesticide industry.

In addition, a UK standalone system needs to take on a range of functions previously performed by the EU. This includes the huge but crucial tasks of setting the levels of pesticides permitted to remain in food (known as Maximum Residue Levels) and deciding which active substances – the active component of a pesticide product – can be used in the UK. The UK's existing institutions involved in governing pesticides are woefully unprepared to take on these roles from the EU.

Even if the UK is able to get its own domestic regulatory regime for pesticides in order, there is a huge risk that it will be undermined by future trade deals with non-EU countries with weaker pesticide standards. The USA, for example, has a history of attempting to lower other countries' pesticide standards through trade negotiations. The USA has almost three times the number of active substances authorised for use than the UK, and so will almost certainly exert considerable pressure on the UK to lower standards – for example to allow imports into the UK of produce containing residues of currently banned pesticides. With the perfect storm of inexperienced UK trade negotiators, more powerful and well-resourced negotiating partners such as the USA, and a shroud of secrecy enclosing the entire process, trade deals may well be the most likely route through which the UK's pesticide standards will be undermined.

Given these significant threats, it is crucial that the Government dedicates the time and resources necessary to ensuring that, post-Brexit, the UK system is able to protect people and the environment from the harmful impacts of pesticides. Regardless of whether the UK exits the EU with a deal or under a 'no deal' scenario, the UK must decide how closely aligned it wants to remain with EU processes and outcomes related to pesticides. The choice it makes will have a profound impact on UK farmers' trading ability. In 2017, 60% of UK food, feed and drink exports went to the EU. If the UK wishes to maintain this level of trade, it must ensure its agricultural produce meets the residue limits set by the EU for both approved and non-approved active substances.

While the first priority must be to defend existing standards, Brexit is not just a chance to copy the system we already have but a unique opportunity for the UK to adopt important innovations that have been effective at reducing pesticide use in other countries. These include a quantitative target for reducing pesticide use; a pesticide tax calculated on the basis of toxicity to health and environment; and the creation of a body – independent from the pesticide industry – to conduct research into non-chemical alternatives to pesticides (including Integrated Pest Management techniques) and provide farmers with the advice and assistance they need to adopt and maintain them.

Given the complexities of pesticide policy and the uncertainties around Brexit, it is easy to view pesticide regulation as a technical matter which only affects farmers. However, this seriously misjudges the issue. How the UK chooses to govern pesticides after Brexit will have profound implications for the health of UK citizens and the natural environment for generations to come. It's absolutely crucial that we get it right.

To read the full report, visit PAN UK's website:
www.pan-uk.org

PESTICIDE ACTION NETWORK *UK*