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UK pesticide standards could be slashed in new trade deals, threatening public health and the environment

UK consumers are likely to be exposed to larger amounts of more toxic chemicals in their food if trade negotiators from the US have their way, warns a new report out today. The warning comes alongside new YouGov polling which reveals that almost three quarters (71%) of the British public want the UK Government to resist US attempts to overturn bans on pesticides, even if this means the “best” trade deal cannot be reached. Authored by Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK), Sustain and trade expert Dr Emily Lydgate, *Toxic Trade* highlights that a rise in exposure to hazardous chemicals could be unavoidable for UK consumers because pesticides are not mentioned on food labels.

While far from perfect, the UK currently has some of the most stringent pesticide regulations in the world, meaning that many agricultural products produced elsewhere can't be sold here. However, concern is mounting that in the wake of the UK's exit from the EU, trade deals currently under negotiation with the USA, and planned imminently for Australia and India, will drive down UK pesticide standards. This not only risks damaging public health but also the environment as trade negotiators push the UK government to allow currently banned hazardous pesticides to be used in UK farms and gardens.

The YouGov poll reveals high levels of concern among consumers, with 71% of those surveyed concerned that a US trade deal will mean larger amounts of pesticides in their food; 79% concerned about impacts to health if UK Government caves to US pressure to lower pesticide standards; and 77% worried about negative impacts on the environment.

Josie Cohen, Head of Policy and Campaigns at Pesticide Action Network, said:

“Much attention has been paid to the dangers of ‘chlorinated chicken’, but the UK public is equally concerned about weakening pesticide protections. We know that US negotiators have our pesticide standards firmly in their sights, and with the talks happening behind closed doors the public has no way of knowing if health and environmental protections are being traded away.”

If UK trade negotiators bow the demands of trade partners then the increased risk to human health could be significant:

- Compared to UK grapes, American grapes are allowed to contain 1,000 times the amount of the insecticide propargite that can affect sexual function and fertility, and has been linked to cancer and miscarriages.

- American apples are allowed to contain 400 times the level of the insecticide malathion than UK apples. Malathion has also been linked to cancer and can impair the respiratory system and cause confusion, headaches and weakness.
- The pesticide chlorpyrifos has been shown to negatively affect the cognitive development of foetuses and young children and is banned from use in the UK but is used by farmers in the US and India.

The environmental impacts of a drop in UK pesticide standards could also be significant. Huge declines in bee populations have been caused by highly toxic neonicotinoids which are currently banned in the UK, but which Australia, the US and India all permit. These countries also authorise pesticides known to contaminate groundwater and harm aquatic ecosystems, such as the herbicides atrazine and diuron.

The report paints an alarming picture of the tactics that overseas negotiators will try to use to water-down standards. US trade officials want the UK to commit to consulting with the US government and private sector before implementing any new pesticide regulations or bans.

Dr Emily Lydgate, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Law at the University of Sussex said:

“A clear and central objective of US negotiators is for the UK to lower its pesticide standards. The current picture in the UK of intense political pressure coupled with a lack of parliamentary and public scrutiny means the risk of this happening is very high.”

The report also highlights the dual risk to UK farmers of reduced pesticide standards.

Vicki Hird, Farm Campaign Coordinator at Sustain said:

“In an already uncertain economic climate, the lowering of pesticide standards could be catastrophic for UK farming as well as the environment. If UK farmers are forced into using pesticides in order to compete with a flood of cheap food imports then their exports will no longer meet EU standards and they’ll lose one of their key markets. 60% of UK agricultural exports currently go to the EU so this could finish off many farming businesses.”

The report calls on the UK government to prioritise human health and meet their stated commitment of *“leaving the natural environment in a better state than we found it”*.

Key recommendations for the UK government:

- Do not allow any weakening of UK pesticide standards via post-Brexit trade agreements.
- Protect UK farmers from being disadvantaged by cheap food imports produced using pesticides, and maintain current pesticide standards so they can continue exporting to the European Union.

- Preserve the power for the UK to exercise its right to continually strive for higher levels of consumer and environmental protection.
- Ensure that trade agreements are developed in the open with the opportunity for full democratic scrutiny.

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Notes to Editors

1. As a former member of the EU, the UK has some of the most stringent pesticide regulations in the world. EU exit will see the UK negotiate its own Free Trade Agreements for the first time in four decades. The UK's capacity and expertise to negotiate has been questioned by those within and outside government, especially given the political pressure to conclude agreements quickly.
2. These negotiations are taking place against a backdrop of rising global concern over pesticides. Recent reports have revealed that one million species are at risk of extinction and a third of insects are now endangered, with pesticides identified as one of the key drivers. Meanwhile, the body of evidence linking pesticides to diseases such as cancer and Parkinson's is increasing.
3. The EU takes an approach that some pesticides are intrinsically hazardous and too dangerous to be in use. It also follows the Precautionary Principle which states that *"When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically."* In contrast, some non-EU countries follow an approach based on the belief that every risk can be mitigated against.
4. The full *Toxic Trade* report includes technical analysis and detail on pesticide regulation in the USA, India and Australia and suggested language for FTAs that will be useful for UK trade negotiators. It is available at: www.pan-uk.org/toxic-trade
5. All polling figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,654 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 30th April - 1st May 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). The polling results are available at: <https://www.pan-uk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/YouGov-Results-on-Trade-May-2020.pdf>