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WWF briefing on the UK's role in building environmental standards for trade and agriculture

This brief provides background and insights on the environmental standards recommendations of the Trade and Agriculture Commission (TAC) which were laid in Parliament on 2nd March 2021. WWF is a core member of Greener UK and this briefing is intended to supplement Greener UK briefings on trade <https://greeneruk.org/briefings/other-policy-areas>.

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KEY POINTS

- Moving to more sustainable food and farming systems is critical for our climate and nature globally, because current systems produce 29% of GHG emissions and drive 70% of terrestrial and 50% of freshwater biodiversity loss.
- The UK has been leading the way on policy to deliver that change with a 'public money for public goods'-based support system for farming, the Global Resource Initiative for sustainable production abroad and a commitment to a National Food Strategy White Paper addressing the whole food system.
- The UK now needs to use its newly independent trade status to support the delivery of stronger and more sustainable food and farming supply chains at home and abroad by taking forward the recommendations on environmental standards set out in the TAC report laid in Parliament on 2nd March 2021.
- WWF are advocating the UK Government take a twin track approach to environmental standards by delivering on two key recommendations in the final report of the Trade and Agriculture Commission:
 - First, start the process of developing national core standards in the White Paper that will follow the second instalment of the National Food Strategy this Spring.
 - Secondly, championing multilateral discussions on an international *Codex Planetarius* at the UN Food Summit in Autumn.
- These would be staging posts on the way to COP 26 which show the UK Government's serious intent to use its new powers as an independent trading nation to move the UK and the world towards a more sustainable food and farming system.

WHY WE NEED STANDARDS FOR TRADE

The **Living Planet Report 2020** shows that globally, the current food and farming systems produce 29% of GHG emissions and drive 70% of terrestrial and 50% of freshwater biodiversity loss. This staggering and sobering statistic demands action globally and nationally.

WWF's proposal for a *Codex Planetarius* provides a route to global action, and our accompanying call for UK core standards would be a platform for the UK to act nationally. The *Codex Planetarius* is a multilateral agreement that requires all food traded internationally to meet minimum environmental standards for production. UK core standards would be the way the UK – as an independent trading nation - codified some of its own high environmental production standards into comparable requirements for imports.

The UK Government is rightly proud that it was first off the blocks with policy to drive a more sustainable food and farming system. It has put in place a 'public money for public goods'-based system for supporting food production at home; the Global Resource Initiative, which is driving demand for sustainable production globally, initially via a deforestation free supply chains; and a National Food Strategy White Paper has been promised this year following an independent review of the whole food system. Combined with the UK's newly independent trade policy and seat at the WTO, the UK is one of the few countries in the world that could champion the development of a new international *codex* from a position of leadership and authenticity because it could do so alongside developing its own national core standards for trade, which would include the environmental standards necessary to deliver on the UK's sustainable food and farming ambitions.

However, the UK approach to trade has had a bumpy start, with the Government finding itself out of step with the public on the importance of setting up trade policies that maintain high food standards. This was resolved by setting up a 6-month Trade and Agriculture Commission (TAC) to report on food and trade before the UK concluded trade deals with big agricultural exporters like the US, Australia, and New Zealand. The Commission's final report went to the Secretary of State, Liz Truss, in February and has now been laid in parliament. DIT's response to the TAC report will tell us how the Government are now positioning themselves to meet the public expectations for the UK to be an environmental leader in food and farming.

The TAC report is an opportunity for Government to start charting the way forward on environmental standards for agriculture. This will not be an overnight job, any new standards introduced need to be brought in with enough time, information, a clear process for farmers wanting to sell into the UK, and dedicated support for developing countries to adapt to meet them. The point of environmental standards is not to throw up barriers to trade but to ensure even treatment between domestic and foreign producers so governments can use policy to ensure UK demand is improving standards of production at home and overseas.

Ensuring the UK's approach to trade does not undermine animal welfare and environmental standards in food production was one of the reasons the TAC was established, so their recommendations on how we do that now, and in the future, should be a starting point for discussion for some real mechanisms to deliver in this important area.

BRIEF HISTORY OF UK STANDARDS FOR TRADE AND AGRICULTURE

It is important to note the UK, like most countries, does not currently have any environmental standards for the food it imports. The standards that are set on the environmental impact of farming only apply to food produced in UK. The situation is similar on animal welfare standards – rules on treatment and care of livestock apply to farmers operating in the UK but not to imports.

This creates problems, as UK pig farmers know. The UK ban on sow stalls in 1999 is a cautionary tale. The ban was brought in without any associated requirement for pork imports and so resulted in UK pig farmers being undercut by farmers in Denmark and Holland where there was no ban in place. History could be repeated. Some countries will move faster than others in the transition to more sustainable, higher welfare farming and to address global issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, antimicrobial resistance and zoonotic diseases. If they are not supported by trade policy, they will find themselves undercut by those who are not acting but still able to export products of an approach to farming which is increasing risks to people and the planet.

The only standards that currently apply to all food sold in the UK, no matter where it comes from, are food safety standards i.e. the UK's sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS) protecting humans, animals and plants from contaminants, diseases, and pests. This is where the famous chlorinated chicken and hormone beef come in. The UK currently has a set of national food standards, which add to international standards and prohibit meat washed in anything but water or injected with growth hormones from being sold in the UK. It is possible for the UK to set similar national environmental and animal welfare standards for imports too, as long as there is a clear policy objective, good scientific rationale, and the standards are applied fairly to domestic and foreign producers.

WWF's view is, there is not only an opportunity to start developing environmental standards for our food, but it is an imperative to ensure UK efforts on farming and land use are really effective in meeting our net zero and nature restoration targets.

There are two types of standards that are relevant if the UK is to start developing environmental standards for food imports as part of its trade policy – international standards and national standards.

INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS

A set of international environmental standards, like the *Codex Planetarius*, would be established by agreement between the countries of the world, and would ensure all traded agricultural products met certain minimum environmental standards. As such, the *Codex Planetarius* (Latin for the book of the planet) would be a tool to protect planetary health in the way the current *Codex Alimentarius* (the book of food), protects human health.

It is instructive to look at the way the *Codex Alimentarius* developed if we are to go on to create another volume. First came the *Codex Alimentarius austriacus*, produced by the food industry and academics in the late 19th and early 20th Century to ensure food safety and quality in the Austrian-Hungarian empire. This eventually became a pan European standard with the establishment of a *Codex Alimentarius Europaeus* in 1958. Then, relatively quickly, in the early 1960's, the book was elevated into an internationally agreed set of guidelines, the *Codex Alimentarius* we know today. The *Codex Alimentarius* is managed and updated by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization and officially recognised by the World Trade Organisation as an international reference point for food standards.

The journey to the first set of internationally agreed standards was a long one, around a hundred years, and it is hoped a *Codex Planetarius* can be developed significantly more quickly, but it is useful to note the journey started with national environmental standards which we turn to next.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS

National environmental standards would be standards the UK develops itself by setting some environmental requirements for imports which reflect the values and priorities we set for farming in the UK.

The standards would be introduced in consultation with trading partners, using metrics that are appropriate and relevant for different geographies, and with a clear route and mechanism for all farmers, including those in developing countries, to meet. As set out earlier, the concept of countries having national SPS standards that are different, and usually higher, than the *Codex Alimentarius* is well understood and accepted as long as those standards are pursuing legitimate objectives and can be backed with scientific evidence. The same would apply to national environment standards. Environmental standards for imports are likely to be developed in the UK more quickly than a *Codex Planetarius* will be agreed, but ultimately, they could happily sit alongside one another.

If the UK put in place national environmental standards that apply to both domestically produced and imported agricultural commodities, it would be the first country in the world to do so. But the US is actually one of the first and few countries that have set national environmental standards for food – in this case, for food harvested from the seas, not the land. In 2017 the US introduced **rules** to ensure that any country that wants to export fish or fish products to the US market has to demonstrate that its fisheries operate under regulations that provide comparable protection for marine mammals as those under which US commercial fisheries operate. The US Marine Mammal Protection Act, which this seafood legislation is based on, could be replicated by the UK for agricultural products. The UK equivalent could focus on the delivery of any or all of the environmental benefits that would result from more sustainable farming - i.e. soil health (organic matter or carbon), habitat and biodiversity in farm settings, greenhouse gas emissions, reduced toxicity to provide clean water, air and land, lower water take and increased water efficiency.

The most likely vehicle for national environmental standards in the UK would be the development of national ‘core standards’ for trade in food that cover a range of issues – environment, animal welfare, and public health – similar to those recommended in the **National Food Strategy Part One**. So, any *Codex Planetarius Britannicus* is likely to be the environment chapter that emerges from a wider and much needed process of codifying the UK’s ‘core standards’ as a newly independent trading nation. There are various ways ‘**core standards**’ could be applied but WWF believe they should include a provision for environmental standards to apply, like food safety standards do, to all food sold in UK whether or not it comes from a country with which we have a trade deal.

UK NEEDS TO ADVANCE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

WWF is advocating a twin track approach where the UK i) uses its new independent voice on trade and its seat at WTO to champion of the codex and ii) starts the development of its own national environmental standards because:

- Championing international environmental standards from a position of leadership at home shows greater commitment and understanding of the urgent need for standards to achieve the UK’s environmental objectives. Developing an international agreement on environmental standards between hundreds of countries should start now but will doubtless take time, and those countries that committed to supporting more sustainable agriculture systems should start making progress themselves, otherwise they might be seen to be kicking the issue into the long grass which would undermine the ability to galvanise support for climate and nature action from farmers, environmentalists, consumers, and retailers.
- The UK, by acting first, can inform and bring others on board to shape international standards that follow. The UK, since it is not a major agricultural exporter by global standards and is a strong advocate of increasing trade with developing nations, is well placed to design standards that can garner widespread support. Plus, we should expect

the UK to continue to innovate and develop leading positions on standards. As a leader on climate and nature restoration, having higher UK standards will always be part of its toolkit, even when a new *Codex Planetarius* is in place. UK national environmental standards will always be set in line with the UK's moral and policy commitment to environmental protection and to ensure the UK contribution to these global environmental challenges is real and effective. When acting early the UK has to ensure it is not just offshoring its environmental impacts because policy is moving at different rates in other countries. Leading countries will always need their own national environmental standards, alongside any international standards, to ensure they are being consistent and even-handed in their requirements from domestic and foreign producers.

- National and international environmental standards for food are vital for the transition to a more sustainable food and agriculture system. The UK already has relatively high standards for agricultural production, but we know we need to go much further in the context of the climate and nature crisis. Many UK businesses already know this and already set higher environmental standards for the producers in their supply chain. However, these voluntary efforts do not act on the bottom quarter of producers who cause up to 50% of environmental damage but produce only an estimated 10% of the product. It helps the best food businesses – producers, manufacturers, and retailers – to go further and faster in the transition to more sustainable agriculture if they can see legislation coming behind them, at the national and international level, that supports good environmental management and increasingly closes out markets to those producers relying on the bad practices we want to leave behind.

The events of the last six months provide further support for UK action on environmental standards. The prospect of an early deal with the Trump administration has been replaced by a longer play to build a trade relationship with the US under Biden who has signalled his primary focus will be covid and climate. The UK-EU deal includes level playing field provisions on the environment and the UK could build confidence that it will not regress by setting out a forward plan on environmental standards and working with the EU and other trading partners on their development.

It is now clearer that aligning trade and environmental policy is a way to win friends and influence internationally. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the new WTO Director General, wants to restore trust in the global trading system by ensuring it contributes to development and tackling climate change, and sustainable agriculture will have a big part to play in both. The UK, by smartly setting out new standards which ensure trade promotes the green farming systems the world needs, could position itself as a forward-thinking new trade actor at a time that the international community are looking for models to green their economies in a globalised and interconnected world.

THE WAY FORWARD

DIT are not required to respond to the TAC's report or recommendations but not taking forward the Commission's recommendations would be a missed opportunity. WWF are advocating the UK Government take a twin track approach to standards for sustainable agriculture and use 2021 to get the policy process started in earnest. It can do this by taking forward two key recommendations of the TAC report:

- First, start the process of developing national core standards in the White Paper that will follow the second instalment of the National Food Strategy this Spring.
- Secondly, championing multilateral discussions on an international *Codex Planetarius* at the UN Food Summit in Autumn.

These would be staging posts on the way to COP 26 which show the UK government's serious intent to use its new powers as an independent trading nation to move the UK and the world towards a more sustainable food and farming system.

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