

Data related to imported food production standards: Introduction

Background

As global trade markets have expanded, there has been an increasing volume of agricultural commodities and food products imported to, and exported from, the United Kingdom (UK). The UK's exit (Brexit) from the European Union (EU) resulted in changes to UK trade policy. In response to the market and political changes, trade agreements and import/export standards are being implemented between the UK and other countries. These trade agreements function to control the trade of goods and services, whilst minimising the financial barriers (for example, tariffs) where possible. However, such agreements can support variation across the minimum standards of production between different sourcing locations.

Consumer demands from food products has expanded from seeking food, which is not just safe, but also of suitable nutritional quality (for example, healthy and providing key nutrients), ethical (for example, demonstrating high animal welfare standards throughout livestock production) and sustainable (for example, having minimal detrimental impacts on the environment). Consumer interest in purchasing and consuming food products derived from sustainable and ethical production practices is becoming more important, with consumers actively wanting to make more informed choices on the foods they purchase and consume.

Reducing trade barriers and promoting trade liberalisation increases ease of tradability between the UK and other nations and may offer consumers access to lower priced goods. Imported food may, however, differ from domestically produced food in terms of nutritional quality, animal welfare standards and environmental standards. To date, free trade agreements (FTAs) between the UK and other countries do not set out clear guidance and requirements around levels of animal welfare, environmental protection, and nutritional composition.

Mechanisms to control and monitor the quality and impact of food is through imported food production standards include sustainability standards, import and export standards or agreements, such as FTAs. For example, FTAs detail terms of trading, commerce, investment, and transit of commodities between two or more cooperating countries or state territories and are being negotiated following Brexit.

Food import and export standards

Economic globalisation and the expansion of global food trade has presented various opportunities and challenges. A primary challenge is how nations can compare the quality and consistency of imported agricultural commodities, to that of domestically produced food. Inconsistencies across food quality for imported agricultural commodities promotes public discourse regarding food safety and quality of the imported food products. Food import and export standards were initially developed to support the prevention of foodborne hazards and deceptive food marketing practices (for example, correct species identification for meat products) and include inspection procedures and certification authorisation systems which are fundamental in the regulatory management of food control practices. The public's perception towards the robustness of import and export food control protocols is dependent on consumer confidence in

the governing standards implemented.

[Gereffi and Joonkoo \(2009\)](#) highlighted characteristic requirements of food import controls to include the following consistency requirements for domestic food production:

- Good manufacturing practice standards
- Defined legislation
- Transparent standard operating procedures (SOPs)
- Recognition by the importation country of the exportation country's food safety protocols
- Uniformity of implementation on a national level
- Established responsibilities for assessment authorities.

Food import and export standards fall into two categories, public standards (for example, established by governments through laws and legislation) and voluntary standards (for example, set by private organisations, industry bodies and non-governmental organisations). The purpose of public food import and export standards is to establish a baseline control mechanism which governs the safety and quality of food consumed from international food supply chains. Public standards support to protect public health and the environmental health of importing countries from infiltration of external agricultural pests, weeds, and diseases. Additionally, public standards function as a verification system to promote product conformity of imported agricultural commodities against an established framework of requirements. Public food import and export standards legislation authorises compliance officers to inspect products, verify documentation, sample for examination via analytical laboratory assessment, implement judicial measures, request product recall, reconditioning or re-exportation and, where necessary, confiscate, detain, reject, or destroy any consignment of a foodstuff which fails the importation inspection protocols as detailed by [Gereffi and Joonkoo \(2009\)](#).

Voluntary food import and export standards are of increasing importance and impact across global agri-food chains. Voluntary standards can detail elements regarding food provenance, animal welfare and environmental sustainability conditions for consideration by producers, over and above those required in public standards. Voluntary standards can function at multiple levels including international, within the territorial boundaries of a country, or within the collective boundary of a group of countries such as the EU. Due to the fluidity in operational capacities across both a national and an international level, voluntary standards can have considerable impact on international trade through private industry associations and/or non-governmental organisation associations.

Trade agreements

Various types of trade agreement exist which are dependent on predetermined concession conditions involving the participating countries. Trade agreements can be either bilateral (for example, involve two countries) or multilateral (for example, involve three or more countries). Trade agreements seek to reduce obstacles to commodity trading through the implementation of trade liberalisation infrastructure (for example, the reduction or complete removal of trade restrictions and trade barriers relevant to product exchange between countries). Trade barriers and/or restrictions include trade tariffs, duties taxes, surcharges, volume quotas, prohibitions and applicable licensing rules which may impact trade exchanges.

Liberalising global trade through the implementation of trade agreements facilitates the expansion of transnational business opportunities for producers, manufacturers, and supply lines. Trade agreements are generally inclusive of clauses which define trade facilitation characteristics. These include intellectual property rights, investment, technical standards, government procurement, environmental provisions, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) requirements. The relaxation or removal of trade restrictions or trade barriers is considered a mechanism to stimulate or support the industrialisation of a country and promote economic growth.

The establishment of trade agreements and the uptake of trade liberalisation associated with them has the potential to influence the quality, nutrition and safety of agricultural commodity products entering the import country. These impact pathways are illustrated in Figure 1 which is adapted from the World Health Organisation (WHO) [Trade and Health Report \(2015\)](#). Trade liberalisation measures have a ripple impact across the supply chain for food and agricultural commodities, influencing foodstuff availability, food safety, cost of food, marketing strategies, consumer buying behaviours, and diet. These factors can influence undernutrition, obesity, and foodborne disease prevalence, but also influence the nutritional intake and general health of a population through increasing accessibility to quality nutrition as highlighted in the World Health Organisation (WHO) [Trade and Health Report \(2015\)](#).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the links between trade liberalisation and food related health. Source: World Health Organisation (WHO) Trade and Health Report (2015).

Project rationale

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) commissioned RSK ADAS Limited to explore potential data sources and measurable metrics which could be used to assess the production standards of imported foods consumed in the UK.

Aim

The aim of the review was to understand whether there are data sources available that can be used to objectively measure key food production standards for animal welfare, environmental sustainability and nutritional composition of food imported to the UK, and compare those standards with those applied to food produced within the UK.

Objectives

The project aim was achieved through the following objectives:

1. Construct and refine an evaluation framework for the review.
2. Define search terms to use when conducting the review of literature.
3. Undertake rapid evidence literature search and screening relevant to the three themes: animal welfare, environmental sustainability, nutritional composition.

4. Evaluate evidence gathered.
5. Construct a final report assessing imported food standards in relation to the three themes.

Purpose

This report and the underlying research are intended to inform the FSA of data and metrics that are available for considering the animal welfare, environmental sustainability, and nutritional standards of imported and exported foods. This data was then considered alongside metrics used to assess UK production standards. The outputs will be used to inform the 2023 Annual Report on Food Standards across the UK.

Scope of works

Import and export standards

The research scope of this review was to consider how three themes (animal welfare, environmental sustainability, and nutritional standards) are considered across international trade and import standards. The working definitions of these themes were:

Animal welfare: Systems, processes and/or procedures which function to promote and safeguard animal health, minimise adverse impacts from disease, and to prevent an animal experiencing discomfort, pain, or suffering.

Environmental sustainability: Systems, processes and/or procedures which function to prevent or minimise the impacts of climate change, environmental contamination, pollution (air, water, and soil), deforestation, habitat destruction, biodiversity and negative impacts on soil health, soil quality and soil structure.

Nutritional composition: Systems, processes and/or procedures which function to ensure the quality of, and nutritional composition of food, as well as the accuracy and transparency in food quality reporting, labelling, and marketing.

Date and metrics in relation to food safety were not considered within the scope of works as this area is well understood and documented in previous research by the FSA.

Countries of focus

Imported food standards from or between any country was considered within scope. However, preference was given to imported food standards that were available in English. No translation of materials was undertaken in this research.

Materials considered in the review

The focus of our search was on imported food production standards. This included a range of materials, including import standards, export standards, trade agreements (for example, FTAs and mutual recognition agreements), voluntary sustainability standards and assurance schemes, and any other import or export specifications that defined animal welfare, environmental sustainability, or nutritional standards for food production.