

UK Trade & Business Commission
Securing a UK-EU Veterinary Agreement

10 June 2021

Agenda: Closed Meeting on Veterinary Services

10.15am-12.00pm

10th June 2021

[Live Evidence Session, 10.15am-12.00pm \[105 MINS\] - Commissioners Only](#)

Chaired by Sir Roger Gale MP

In attendance:

- **Members of the Commission:** Sir Roger Gale MP (Chair); Liz Saville Roberts MP; Hilary Benn MP; Sir Roger Gale MP; Claire Hanna MP; Paul Blomfield MP; Dr Philippa Whitford MP; Paul Girvan MP; Dr Geoff Mackey; Tamara Cincik; Caroline Lucas MP; Professor Alan Winters; Alison Williams; Dr Stephen Farry MP; Dr Philippa Whitford MP; Dame Rosemary Squire; Andrew Ballheimer; Layla Moran MP;
- **Expert Advisor to the Commission:** David Henig.
- **Attendees from the Secretariat (Best for Britain):** Naomi Smith; Flo Hutchings; Julia Meadon; Paul Haydon; Laura Savage; Jake Verity; Lauren Tavriger.

Apologies: Aodhan Connolly; Professor Shearer West; Peter Norris

Sir Roger Gale MP

Welcome to this evidence session on veterinary issues on a potential EU-UK agreement on these issues. The trade in our products is absolutely essential to both the EU and the United Kingdom and attracts far greater attention than the economic value might suggest. So, we are delighted this morning to welcome James Russell, President of the British Veterinary Association, Gary McFarlane, Director of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health in Northern Ireland, Gail Soutar who is the Chief EU Exit and Internal Trade Advisor for the National Farmers' Union and Richard Griffiths, Chief Executive of the British Poultry Council.

Because of time constraints we're going to go pretty much straight into the question session, but James Russell, I'd like to ask you just to say a few words on behalf of those who have launched a report this morning, or it is effectively being launched at this meeting, from the SPS Certification Working Group, so if you'd like to take the floor first James and then I'll move into the questions.

James Russell

Thank you Chair, and yes the SPS Certification Working Group is a group which has come together from right across industry and the certifiers and we've been meeting together since before the end of the grace period to look and try and identify issues but more importantly I think to explore solutions and to engage with Government on how we might achieve some of those solutions and we're very pleased that DEFRA have engaged with that group, especially through the work of our Government vets. So the report that we're releasing today urgently calls for a new veterinary agreement and to streamline the processes because you've got honestly the restrictions that are being imposed on those exporting companies at the moment are crippling their ability to export to the EU which we know is Britain's largest trading partner. But also it is restricting movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so we're really grateful for the opportunity to explore that report within this session and we welcome the fact that we feel there's a nicely balanced panel here today to be able to answer all the questions around that, so thank you Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed, so we now go to the first question, Claire Hanna, the question I gather is directed mainly at Gary first please. Claire, the floor is yours.

Claire Hanna MP

Thank you very much Gary and thank you for your presentation. My apologies, I actually wasn't sure that it was my question but there is plenty of good questions asked. What's the role of veterinary checks and export health certificates in the food and drinks exports and can you outline how this has changed since Brexit and the New Year?

Gary McFarlane

Thanks Claire and good morning everyone. Yeah, obviously as you might expect me to say coming from an environmental health background, it's really important to remain focused on the fact that whether it's exports to other countries in which case obviously other countries call the shots, or whether it's imports into this country, vital sanitary controls and checks are about public health and public protection, that's why they're there, that's why they're important and I think we need to underscore this discussion this morning with that point to start with.

Now obviously in very simplistic terms the EU has arguably in my view one of the best public health, health protection systems in the world when it comes to food standards, the UK has left that particular arrangement and in the absence of a properly negotiated agreement which is really in my view where the root of this problem lies we are now of course required by the EU to demonstrate compliance with their standards. And so in very simple terms that's where the additional burdens have come from and as I'm sure James and other colleagues will subscribe to, part of the solution to this in my view is a properly negotiated agreement around veterinary controls, so that we get some way back towards where we were prior to the New Year in 2021 whenever these new arrangements kicked in. Because if we don't do that then once we get to the end of this year we're into another significant unknown I think in terms of the impacts. Obviously there are impacts on businesses but there are also impacts for the bodies that actually are required to carry out the checks and that's different across the UK, slightly different arrangements in Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK, but it does involve both veterinarians and environmental health practitioners. I hope that clarifies.

Claire Hanna MP

It does, thank you, James is there anything you'd like to add to that?

James Russell

Thank you, I was sort of working through the notes I've got here as Gary was speaking and feel that he's hit most of the points that I would want to make, but I think just to reinforce the point that these are necessary and important checks for food safety and for disease protection as well as we begin to talk about import checks later on. So yeah, really pleased that we're starting to talk around how do we develop and improve the ability to apply those checks and recognising that they're not something that we just need to try and work around.

Claire Hanna MP

That's great, thank you very much. Chair, back to you.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thanks very much indeed, Dr Whitford, Philippa Whitford, you have a supplementary on this.

Philippa Whitford MP

Yes, thanks very much Chair, if I could come to Gail Soutar and also Gary may want to contribute briefly. At our last session we heard of small businesses having to abandon direct internet selling to individual customers in the EU because of the impact of customs duties and VAT, but is it not the case that with no veterinary agreement this is even worse for those selling food products such as cheese, smoked salmon or specialist meats as even small volume shipments require an export health certificate which is prohibitively expensive?

Gail Soutar

Yes thank you for the question, I absolutely wholeheartedly agree, we've had a number of members and a few members sort of small businesses, food businesses, that have come to us because they have really struggled with the bureaucracy and you're absolutely right to pick up that there has been a tendency to silo issues into customs which is sort of dealt with by HMRC which is fiendishly complicated and then there's the SPS checks which is more managed by DEFRA and again it is very, very complicated. I think that the Government is getting better at trying to bring the kind of breadth of the requirements on businesses together but there is still a tendency for those to be siloed and that doesn't help with understanding and ability to engage in these processes. So you're absolutely right, the actual cost of getting a certificate, employing a vet to do the consignment based checks, it is very, very prescriptive. If you take the example, and I'm sure James can probably talk about some more actual figures, but if you take for example for GB to Northern Ireland the Government is reimbursing up to a maximum of £150 per export health certificate, so if you've got a consignment, a hamper of cheese and wine that is valued at £90 but it costs up to £150 to get the certificate you can see very quickly that it's just not practical to continue with that business, so I absolutely wholeheartedly agree with the concern.

Philippa Whitford MP

I don't know whether Gary or James or anyone else wants to add anything particularly around this kind of micro-selling which had grown up through the internet.

Gary McFarlane

Philippa, it's Gary here, yeah just to add really I suppose that it's not just the ... there are not just issues around the cost to business, there is the capacity issues around the issue of export health certificates, so I know there's a question around funding for this but the point I'm really trying to make is throwing all the money in the world at this would not necessarily fix it because not only do businesses have to pay for these, and incidentally it's slightly different in Northern Ireland where the veterinary checks are actually carried out by DAERA officials, so it's a different arrangement to Great Britain, but notwithstanding that there are capacity issues for both vets and EH personnel involved in this.

Philippa Whitford MP

Yeah, I mean I'm in Ayrshire, so you know we export significantly to Northern Ireland so both my local fishing industry and the kind of specialty foods have been hit by this.

Gary McFarlane

Yeah, I would imagine so, yeah.

Philippa Whitford MP

Anyone else, James or anyone else who wishes to comment.

James Russell

I may just add to that, I won't repeat what's already been said but just to add to that as well, I think the particular challenges of those short shelf life products which are trying to be exported as well, where we know that we need to have this 24-hour pre-notification of you know the requirement for a VCP to be ready for an import check, and we understand why that's there so the capacity can be put in place to ensure that those checks can be carried out, but you can imagine that on products which are you know perhaps just have a few days of life on them anyway that that adds just another layer of complexity to getting that system completed.

Philippa Whitford MP

I mean that's been a major issue for my local fishing fleet, it's langoustine and lobster and 85% of it goes to the EU and they are still struggling with the issues, they just can't get it there fresh enough to get the prices they used to. That's fine, Chair if no one else has anything to add.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much, then we'll move onto the second question from Tamara Cincik please.

Tamara Cincik

Thank you very much Chair. So my question is directed primarily at Richard and Gail, it is this. Businesses have many concerns about the new processes, to what degree does the UK Government have any control over these or is it entirely down to the requirements of the importing country? Richard, you first please.

Richard Griffiths

Well at its core it is they answer the importing country, but I think part of this discussion and the questions are coming up later and James has already mentioned it about a veterinary agreement, that's where you can smooth those edges and reduce the impact and burden of the requirements. I totally agree with what's been said about the importance of the sanitary and phytosanitary checks it's absolutely essentially for good food. But, we can do better at agreeing with the EU, how and where and when we do these checks. Regulatory alignment, not a popular term in Government at the moment but regulatory alignment plays a huge role in ensuring that a veterinary agreement could be reached. So it's those routes, while the fundamental requirements are within the importing country the ways in which we can achieve it are potentially manageable and we can negotiate on those. So there is, for my mind, opportunity there if we can come to an agreement.

Tamara Cincik

Thank you. Gail?

Gail Soutar

Yeah, just to add it would definitely say continued negotiations is within the gift of our Government, I think the Government has made clear that it's not going to diverge from EU rules for the sake of divergence which we obviously welcome, but we are almost in the worst of all worlds now at the moment in that you know we're feeling the full brunt of third country control from the EU and we haven't diverged and what our position and very much supported through the SPS Certification Working Group document published today is that you know we are in this unique starting point where our rules are aligned with the EU, we continue to share many of the same values, expectations, so from an outcome perspective I don't suspect that our regulatory landscape is going to change such that it would create that sort of actual real pressure on public health, on animal, plant biodiversity concerns etc, so we're really looking for the Government to continue to negotiate, to show willingness but it is looking for these pragmatic solutions to try and deal with the friction.

Just another couple of points and I've mentioned it already but you know it's within the Government's gift to ensure that there is adequate resourcing again available for training vets, training certifying officers, ensuring that there are enough support officers at Ports, customs officials, to help with the process because as I said earlier it is fiendishly complicated and if you've got that kind of dedicated, well-resourced, and I agree you know probably throwing as much money at this isn't going to be the problem, but you can, Government can do more to ensure that there are enough customs support agents out there to help people with their customs rules, to navigate

people through the SPS requirements and the clear communications. Government has done a good job in producing a huge amount, a huge amount of guidance but it's still overwhelming for a small business, a micro-business, you know where do you go. If they can create one-stop-shops like they have with the trader support service that they have for Northern Ireland that could help with some of the GB to EU trade as well. So there are some things that are within the gift of our Government and whilst they are doing some efforts and I commend that, the job at hand requires a huge amount more effort than what we are currently seeing.

Tamara Cincik

Thank you Gail and just before I hand back to the Chair I wonder if Gary or James you have any points to add?

James Russell

Yeah thank you, I would just add in the other bit that I think is within the UK Government's competence which is to start to plan now more effectively for what we will do with the import regime as that comes online because we recognise that that will be another demand on veterinary time in particular, but on time more generally. We know that that's been delayed but we need to use this opportunity to streamline that imports regime and look at a more risk based and bespoke risk priority system for the UK and I'd like to highlight that as vets we haven't yet been engaged in that work.

Tamara Cincik

Thank you and lastly I've got Gary, do you have any points?

Gary McFarlane

Thank you, well just briefly to really support what Richard said because I absolutely agree with him. It's not a politically popular thing to say but again trying to get this down to simplistic pragmatic, a simple pragmatic look at this, as I said at the start, the key here is making sure that we either maintain or exceed the standards that the EU require, and you know I said at the start that the EU safety standards are the best in the World and so too are their environmental standards and that's very linked to all of this because clearly of course environmental standards affect food. So to me it makes absolutely sense, why would we not want the best food safety and environmental standards in the World? From a business point of view it makes complete sense to me, so just really to support what Richard said.

Tamara Cincik

Thank you for that and I love that you're doing this from the car, it's very 21st Century.

Gary McFarlane

I'm actually on holiday today.

Tamara Cincik

OK well enjoy your holiday after this session and I'll hand back to the Chair, thank you very much to everyone.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thanks very much indeed and thanks Tamara and I hope your committee session goes well, Tamara is going off now to go and give evidence to a Select Committee. Third question, Liz Saville Roberts please, you have the floor.

Liz Saville Roberts MP

Thank you very much Chair. Now part of the work that we've done so far, we've seen pictures and visualisations of the extensive forms which need to be printed and physically signed and also you know reading in the SPS Certification Working Group's report a description of the documentation as it stands as being, well the present situation as being a throwback to the 1970s and archaic and not fit for purpose. I'd like to address my question therefore to Richard and then to Gary in the first instance, but do you think this process can and should be automated and how would that help UK exporters? Richard first of all please.

Richard Griffiths

Thank you, yes absolutely, I mean that's one of the fundamentals that we need to embrace is the digitalisation of the process, that will help immensely to streamline the process, to ease the burden on people, we've already talked about a lack of people. But it's also, I think it's an indicator for the additional effort that has had to be put in by businesses, yes there's the forms and the administration side, but also within the system there's been massive additional requirements for time, for people in the preparation of trade, for the preparation of loads, all the internal business requirements as well, so when you ... it's not just about the burden, it's about the cost. At the moment in our sector we estimate that the additional cost per load, per lorry load, is around £750 to £1000 additional from what it was and when you consider that we alone as the poultry meat industry export up to 400 loads a week that's an awful lot of money that is having to be found, money and resources, so digitalisation is the first step but it's absolutely crucial.

Liz Saville Roberts MP

Thank you very much, could you just quantify how long it actually takes to fill in these forms?

Gary Griffiths

I don't have that figure to hand but perhaps others may be able to.

Liz Saville Roberts MP

OK possibly but thank you very much for quantifying it in the financial terms, that's really useful. And Gary.

Gary McFarlane

Thanks Liz, yes just to absolutely agree again, once again with Richard. We have actually engaged with our members on the frontline of this, so to give the Commission some flavour for this, the forms on the, if you like, the regulatory check side are all largely paper based at this present moment in time. Now there are reasons for that and whilst the only caveat I would add, whilst I absolutely think a digital solution is the way to go it needs to be robust, it needs to have checks and balances built in around security so that ... I mean part of the reason why the forms are paper based is it's much, much less ... it's much more difficult to actually fraudulently reproduce them, but that doesn't mean that in this day and age there's not good digital solutions. I mean if you are, just to go back to Philippa's point, if you're a fishing boat unloading langoustines on the Isle of Mull and the forms aren't right then the Officer has to go back to the mainland on a ferry to get a form. That's how bad the implication ... you know for colleagues in Northern Ireland, if it's Port of Ogee they have to go back to Ards to reprint forms and print them out again with all the subsequent delays that takes, particularly when you're talking about short shelf life fresh products. So absolutely digitisation is the way to go.

Liz Saville Roberts MP

Thanks for that illustration Gary. James, do you want to contribute?

James Russell

Yeah thank you, if I may just to start by recognising that whilst we absolutely welcome the idea of digitisation that you know it's going to facilitate the work that's being done here rather than to eliminate the need for it, but hopefully we can therefore be working much more effectively. But if I can help by trying to add a little bit of time to this, you know the time that's being spent on this, this is I think included in the report that the SPS Working Group has submitted today, but until the end of May we estimated that excluding sort of equine and pet travel, so just looking at products of animal origin we were something like 13,500% up on this time last year, having completed roughly 121,000 certificates and our best estimate was that that is 116 years of OV time. So I should say OV or Export Health Officer, Environmental Health Officer time to complete those certificates, so think that gives a bit of a flavour for the ask that we're making of these people.

Liz Saville Roberts MP

Thank you very much indeed, that's a very useful illustration as well. Gail, is there anything else you'd like to add on that? OK, thank you very much Chair, back to you.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thanks Liz. Fourth question please, Layla Moran.

Layla Moran MP

Thank you Chair and thank you to everyone, actually I think a lot of what I wanted to ask has kind of been covered by Liz's question but just to sort of go back a step, how many extra checks is this, I mean so it'll obviously depend on you know different products potentially, but just to sort of take it down to sort of very first principles, what did it used to be and what is it that is happening now that needs to be automated that is taking so much time, that is costing so much money, just in very simple terms. James perhaps do you want to start, or anyone else?

James Russell

Yeah, with pleasure. And you know this was something that right from the point at which the EU exit vote was in place, you know we recognised that regardless of whether there was a deal or a no deal, whatever, that there was going to become a need for these export health certificates because we were no longer going to be operating in this single market. So, you know I think it's important to recognise that we had some time to prepare for this but that there was perhaps a degree of resistance in some porters to preparing for it. But by the end of 2020 Government had estimated that there was going to be a 300% increase in the number of export health certificates required, we think that that, well we understand the maths behind that we think that it is just that, you know an estimate and as I've alluded to our concern is that we don't yet know where we're going to end up, because we don't yet understand exactly what ... well we understand what the requirements for export certification are going to be once we reach the end of the grace period with Northern Ireland for example, but what we can't predict as well is the impact that that's going to have on business and therefore the number of exports which would have taken place which perhaps don't in the future. So, it remains something which is very hard to predict for the future, but I alluded in my answer to the last question as to where we were up to you know as we sat at the end of May this year.

Layla Moran MP

Thank you very much, does anyone else have anything, yes.

Gary McFarlane

Layla, just to come in on what James has said and to put it very simply. Obviously the answer in the previous arrangements, i.e. prior to leaving the EU none of these checks were required and that's because we had alignment with European standards. As part of the EU obviously we were part of it and that brings us back to the whole point about the absolute criticality of making sure we get an agreement that aligns with those standards. Because if that's negotiated properly, set up properly then we could get back some considerable way to a situation where many of these checks would actually not be necessary. But as James has already alluded with figures, and I could give you other practical examples, you know these checks have gone from zero to in some cases tens of thousands per year.

Layla Moran MP

Actually, Gary that would be really helpful for me, so that practical example, could you give us one?

Gary McFarlane

Layla what I will do, if I can email you some figures around that that would actually illustrate in simple numerical terms.

Layla Moran MP

That would be fantastic. Gail?

Gail Soutar

Yeah, could I just really draw your attention to a report that the British Meat Processing Association have done and in there they have a fantastically scary diagram of a process map which shows the checks that were required when we were members of the Single Market and basically if you want to send pork chops to Paris you loaded the lorry and you had a consignment note that the haulier had in his cab and then drove off to Paris and that was it. And actually how they have demonstrated what are the new requirements step-by-step there's about 25 new steps that are required and I think it does very ably sort of show the complexity and how we have gone overnight, nothing changed really in regulatory terms apart from us leaving in the transition period, but how we've gone from having no checks to having these full checks in terms of the process, so if you haven't already seen that BMPA report I would definitely look for the 'pork chops to Paris' example.

Layla Moran MP

Thank you very much. And Richard, I don't know if you've got ...

Richard Griffiths

Just I think to add that while we talk about the export health certificates which is a fantastic example in this and I think Gail is mentioning here about the BMPA report is that there's all the business requirements behind this as well, so we're now in a different tax and revenue regime, you're exporting to a different regime, you have to engage an agent in the border control post in which the trade is happening, is going into. So there's all these additional costs. You have to be registered, you have to have your registration, the EORI number etc, so there's a lot of business administration behind the export health certification as well. So I think I endorse the BMPA report as well.

Layla Moran MP

Thank you. Is there an estimate of the cost of that extra registration that need to happen?

Richard Griffiths

I think what I said previously it was about £750 to £1000 per load we worked it out as and that's across the board for those, to cover those additional costs and resources.

Layla Moran MP

OK understood, thank you very much. That's it from me, back to you Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed. I'd like to drill down into this just a little, we've talked a great deal about money which is obviously very important and a great deal about the time that this takes, but what about the people who are doing it, presumably it involves an enormous amount of manpower and that manpower has to be trained, so are the trained staff available to do these jobs and even if they are now are they going to be available in the future? Richard, perhaps you'd like to have a crack at that one as well please.

Richard Griffiths

OK I will try, I'll defer to James on the veterinary provision because we have experts there, but yes, I think it has been an additional burden on businesses for skilled people, we are seeing at the moment and you will see in the media recently the vacancies across the board in food and farming are enormous and for sectors that rely, have historically relied on non-UK labour I think the gaps are only going to grow and there will be knock-on effects through businesses, including into the trade and export arenas. So yeah, we are seriously concerned about the numbers of people who we're going to need in the future. I mean we're relatively small in terms of people sector, but that just means that when there are gaps, when there are vacancies it's doubly important for us to be able to fill those roles, but yes the burden has increased and we are concerned about the future of skills and people.

Sir Roger Gale MP

I'm going to come to the veterinary aspect of this and James in a moment, but from the more technical point of view, Gary are the people available to do the work that you're involved in?

Gary McFarlane

Well James, obviously this falls down to a breakdown between qualified vets and qualified EHOs, so James will comment on the veterinary side better than me, but in simple, in a very, very simple blunt answer no there are not. There is not the trained staff out there, even if all the ... again it's back to money not being the solution here and I think that that is something that we have been raising with Government in general about the need to invest in the environmental health workforce in terms of provision and capacity for the future, so in simple terms no, there's not enough qualified people out there to do the work so ... and what we're seeing is significant numbers of advertisements for new personnel in the Ports, in BCPs, in local authorities in general, any work where they have export, businesses that are exporting and they're struggling to find the staff.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Do you know if we're taking any steps to try and train these people with a view to the future?

Gary McFarlane

I don't Sir Roger, as I say we are raising this issue and whilst we have seen, we ourselves within CIH have run some campaigns recently, I mean it's not just exports, I mean the pandemic has highlighted the lack of trained staff in environmental health, we have brought that to the attention of Government, but there are ways in which the Government could really assist with this, we have run our own campaigns and we have seen an increase in undergraduates onto undergraduate programmes but obviously that's a long process before we see any output. But there are other routes into the profession for example through apprenticeship schemes and so on and so forth and there is a lot that could be done to actually increase and build capacity. It's a whole separate conversation, I'm happy to have it elsewhere.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed, that's most helpful. James, from the veterinary point of view we know that the overwhelming majority of LVOs used to come from the European Union countries, given that they're now not doing that what's the veterinary situation?

James Russell

Yes, so I think to start with I think as a profession we can be really proud that as far as we're aware there hasn't been a situation yet where a consignment has not been able to be exported for want of a veterinary signature, so on the face of it you know you could say we're doing OK, we're coping with the capacity needs. But I think there's a number of things behind that. First of all as I alluded to in an earlier answer that you know we see the need for veterinary time increasing as we come to the end of the grace period and as we bring import controls in and so on and so forth, but also the increasing number of people required to sign those certificates have been drawn from in some large part, from those official veterinarians carrying out the official checks work for us, so our slaughterhouse work, the surveillance work which is such an important part of our food safety and of providing food which is going to be appropriate for export in the final ... in the end anyway. So what we are able to report back is that the reduction in English language requirement for those OV's coming to work in a supervised and limited capacity within that slaughterhouse environment, which was passed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons earlier this year was implemented at the

beginning of June because we recognised that where we have a weakness is in that section behind the export house certificate work. And we maintain a very close liaison with the Food Standards Agency to understand how that contingency is being used. But those people are still largely coming in from EU accredited countries, so the European Association of Establishments of Veterinary Education, so we have absolutely no concerns about their veterinary qualifications but we've had to reduce this English language requirement in order to better enable people to be able to come in and work because we recognised that it just was not happening in the numbers that we expected.

I know that UK Chief Veterinary Officer, Christine Middlemiss, in her evidence session to EFRACOM last week highlighted that it's really difficult to tease out within that how much of that reduction in travel to the UK by these vets is to do with Covid and how much of it is to do with Brexit, so I'd struggle to answer that part of that question but there are moves afoot to try and increase the number of people coming in into a profession which we recognise works at somewhere between 10-12% under capacity which is why we ended up on the shortage occupation list again a couple of years ago.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Obviously, we're concerned about human health but are there any animal welfare implications in all of this?

James Russell

I think we can be confident that all of the animal welfare checks which need to be carried out are being carried out. Where we would highlight the greater animal health concerns would be the sign which I think we will come onto later, so under about the fact that the UK Chief Veterinary Officer no longer has quite the same access to the European Surveillance Networks as we did as a member state and we recognise that that places a huge onus on her shoulders to utilise her own relationships to understand what those risks are at our borders and to try and keep disease out essentially.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you, and Gail all the animals that we're talking about comes from farms, what is the NFU view of this?

Gail Soutar

Well I think I would just use one of the statistics from the first quarter of this year the value of exports, food and live animal exports down 28%, £687 million, so whilst I absolutely agree and commend James and his colleagues for keeping up with current demand there's no doubt that the demand is dampened in comparison to normal years, so if we strive to get back to where we were as a key exporter into the EU market then there's going to be much greater demand on vets and also if we look to the situation in Northern Ireland, if the easements that are currently in place, the Stamney [ph 0:38:49.2] system is in place for simplified certification of goods from GB to NI comes to an end, and obviously we don't know what's happening with the on-going negotiations yet, but if it does that's going to place a huge burden again on the shoulders of vets.

From an NFU perspective you know we are not hearing of any kind of pressure at farm level, of local vets not being able to service their clients because they are occupied elsewhere so I'm pleased to

report that the veterinary service is very much keeping up its duty with farmers, so I don't think that there is really an on-farm effect as yet, but all the pressures are certainly growing in terms of if we want to get back to some degree of normality and increase our exports then we could start to see the system really pressured.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed. Question six, Professor Winters please.

Professor Alan Winters

Yes, thank you Roger. I'd like to sort of shift the focus a little bit and ask the extent to which we have sort of decent levels of cooperation between essentially the central UK authorities and the devolved administrations and including plans for when the UK introduces its own import regime which at the moment it doesn't have essentially. Perhaps Gail could start and then we'll move round the table afterwards.

Gail Soutar

Yeah, I've no reason from a farmers' perspective to doubt that the cooperation is happening between central Government and the devolved representing NFU England and Wales members I know that there is dialogue and conversations, I know there is quite a high degree of cooperation between officials in terms of the West Coast facing Ports and the support that they can get from central Government in terms of the requirements. Where I've got a little bit more expertise is on the engagement on the continental perspective and again I think there are individual initiatives which really should be welcomed, the Government has got liaison sessions with the Belgian Government for example and their officials, the Dutch Government, they are running webinars with the Spanish, the French, so there is a high degree of engagement but you could say maybe it is just a drop in the ocean, you know one webinar session that lasts two or three hours helps with understanding but does it really get out to the people on the ground who actually, you know the customers that actually need to know this knowledge and actually need to understand the rules and ensure that there is [inaudible 0:41:41.4] application of the rules underway, so I think what they're doing in the current regime is fine, you know they're doing multiple of these webinars but it comes back to the point we've already made that there is a fundamental question about is this the relationship we want to keep going and working with and trying to improve or is there a bigger question here in terms of with veterinary agreements, trying to simplify the process as much as possible. So it's probably not quite answering your question Professor, but I've got no criticism of what they are currently doing except that it is such a small drop in the ocean.

Professor Alan Winters

Well thank you very much Gail, in fact I was going to ask a supplementary question about cooperation with European members states as opposed to the Commission, so let me sort of throw that in as well. Gary, given you have close connections with devolved administrations do you have any views on this?

Gary McFarlane

I suppose really to cover what Gail has said, there's nothing on the face of it at least to suggest that there's not dialogue between Government officials in Westminster and Government officials in the devolved administration in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. To what extent Government officials in Westminster understand the actual ramifications of some of this for devolved nations is perhaps a slightly different question, but you know whilst I don't have necessarily detailed insight into this I've not heard anything to suggest, speaking to colleagues, that there is a lack of engagement around this.

Professor Alan Winters

Thank you. Richard?

Richard Griffiths

Yes, thank you. In these first months of the year I would say that we have become very proficient at engaging devolved administration and EU on a technical officials levels, I think I would describe it as fire-fighting the first quarter of this year, we've had to become good at fixing problems that have arisen. When we started the year we were having loads rejected for having the wrong coloured stamp on the piece of paper, so that was our starting point and it has improved since then. I have to say that the CVOs across all the administrations have been extremely helpful and have been a fantastic resource for all the nations and the work that their areas have put in has been really, really helpful to industry. My concern is as we look ahead I'm not confident that we have the, as I say the political engagement and the political will to find lasting solutions for this, because we can't go on fire-fighting as we have been because it's just not sustainable, whether with the numbers, the vacancies, the lack of resources, it's simply not sustainable. So we've done OK so far because we've had to, but it's not a long-term solution.

Professor Alan Winters

Thank you. Could you say who CDOs are?

Richard Griffiths

They're Chief Veterinary Officers.

Professor Alan Winters

CVOs, sorry understood, thanks very much. James any final reactions from you?

James Russell

Yeah absolutely thank you, and you know BVA is in regular contact with our CVOs, our Chief Veterinary Officers and I think it's important to recognise the skills professionalism and ability to work together that they bring to this and I think the one thing I would like to point to is that we do have the benefit of having our Northern Ireland Chief Veterinary Officer, someone who is operating an EUVCP and I would suggest that we could improve this joined up approach by bringing DAERA and DEFRA closer together to build on an EHC compliance.

But to pick up on a couple of the points Richard has just made, we've engaged with the French Embassy for a good time now, and right back at the beginning of January we understood for them that non-compliance has accounted for 90% of exports at that point. The most recent weeks that we've got data for brought us up to the 16th of May and we were down to 5% and of that 5% less than half was to do with the quality of certification. And building on that further I think perhaps what's important to recognise is that that's not just about the person filling it in getting it wrong, it's about the consistency of interpretation by the person reading it at the other end as well, and we heard just yesterday of a load of six ... you know a consignment of six identical loads with six identically completed certificates, four of which passed muster and continued on their journeys and two of which were rejected. And I don't say that to sort of point at or you know call out those vets who are carrying out those import checks on the EU side, but simply to highlight this has been a learning process for all of us and I think that you know by having that cooperation, by continuing to engage with DEFRA and using them as our competent authority to work with the Commission and highlight where we're finding these difficulties, we've seen great progress being made and we continue to engage with that to make it even better.

Professor Alan Winters

Thank you, may I just ask a brief follow up question, you said that we've gone down from I think was it 60% rejections to 5% rejections, is that because some people have just stopped trying, in other words is the issue that everyone's got better or some people have just given up and vacated the field?

James Russell

We can certainly share the data with you Professor, I think it's contained within the SPS Working Group that shows that I think export numbers or certificate numbers are at least holding level over that period of time, so I think there's been a huge improvement in compliance both of the completing people and of the interpreting people over that period of time.

Professor Alan Winters

Excellent, thank you very much indeed everyone, back to you Roger.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you, Alan. Andrew Ballheimer please, question seven.

Andrew Ballheimer

Thank you very much Mr Chair, thank you to each of the witness as well for their clear evidence. As we look ahead and we look at the checks, final products from the EU that are going to be introduced at the start of 2022, I'm very interested in how many extra sort of levels of checks are going to be needed as a result of that change, so James first if that's OK?

James Russell

Thank you, and I'm really sorry to say I don't think we quite know, but I don't think we quite know. But what I think we can point to is yeah, the £14 million worth of investment to local authorities to look at trying to recruit the 500 new staff including OV's just to try and understand where we're at with those import checks, so I think we can begin to get an idea of the magnitude and scale of this. But I would also point to the fact that we're aware that there are EU countries who are concerned about this as well, because for every certificate, every consignment which is going to be checked as an import check on the UK side, there has got to be an export check on the EU side. So I know that, again, referring back to conversations with the French Embassy that they were quite pleased that we delayed the implication of import checks earlier this year because they weren't feeling sufficiently prepared at that point and we understand that they perhaps made changes to their rules to allow non-French native vets to do that export certification work, and the reason that wasn't available before is the slight difference really in the set-up in France, the people undertaking that work are civil servants, they are Government employees. So I think on both sides we're aware of the need to ramp up quite significantly.

Andrew Ballheimer

Are there fall back plans or contingency plans, sort of because it's, how you describe it is it's just unclear isn't it and it's only half a year away.

James Russell

If I could say that we look forward to being engaged in that discussion.

Andrew Ballheimer

Thank you for that. Gary, maybe I'd be interested in hearing your view please?

Gary McFarlane

Yeah, thank you, as James has alluded to it's potentially significant. It's very, very difficult to put hard numbers around this but you know once again I go back to what I said previously, you know we're moving from ... because of the lack of properly negotiated frameworks and standards we're moving from a situation potentially where none of those checks were required to a situation where depending on what the UK Government decide to implement by way of import checks, potentially huge volumes of checks being required. And you know I mean there are solutions to all of this and I know we're going to get to this, I'm conscious that this is all sounding very concerning, but I do underscore again, and this is particularly important for public protection in the UK, that import controls are going to be critical to ensuring public health. Food crime is rife, colleagues still, and if we leave open doors then we put the public at risk.

Andrew Ballheimer

Richard, anything to add?

Richard Griffiths

I don't have any greater insight and figures on that but if exports, we've gone up from 900 in the first four months of this year, we've gone up from 900 export health certificates to 110 export health certificates and they're just for exports, assume that you would get the same number coming in for that when we start for that period, that same huge increase. And we're creaking to do exports, I don't think we've got any chance of doing imports successful and in a sustainable system.

Andrew Ballheimer

Gail, finally?

Gail Soutar

Thank you and what I would add as well, I mean obviously from an NFU perspective we would love to be the supplier of choice for all British consumers here but there is obviously things that we do need to import from the EU because we don't produce them here, or not in the quantities. We recognise that we import about 30% of the food that we consume in the UK from the EU, so this has to be done with one eye recognising that we are heavily reliant on our food supply from the EU. However, from a farmer's perspective it is frustrating that our exporters are facing the full extent of the EU controls at the border and yet imports from the EU can more or less flow in largely you know unhindered. From a biosecurity perspective by and large we do recognise that the EU has similar approaches and rules that we have, James I'm sure will talk about the surveillance databases that we no longer have access to, but our concern was actually more about rest of world product entering the EU, transiting through the EU to come to our shores and there was earlier on some concern about just how robust, if you imagine and I don't want to name any names, if you imagine product coming from a country outside of the EU, flying into an EU Port and then being trucked on a lorry into Dover, you know are there robust checks in place at Dover to make sure that that product is not bringing any kind of threat of disease or food risk to humans and we were concerned about that and the Government has tightened some of the guidelines which does require goods that are transiting the EU to be checked through a border control force, but that does rely on the importer going to those border control force and having those goods checked. So there is definitely some concern that our external borders are not as robust as they need to be at the moment.

Andrew Ballheimer

Thank you very much everyone, Mr Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you, Andrew. Dr Geoff Mackey please, the eighth question.

Dr Geoff Mackey

Thank you very much Mr Chair. It's been well documented that one of our business that works in bio-pesticides didn't manage to get through phytosanitary checks for nearly six months. I'd like to try and dig into some of the detail a little bit regarding process, because the EU has an extensive process for approving countries and establishments that export into the block, I just wonder would our

witnesses like to comment on what extent they think the UK Government is planning to replicate these extensive processes. Gary, could we start with you please? And thanks very much for joining us while you're on holiday by the way, it's always appreciated.

Gary McFarlane

You're welcome Geoff and colleagues. It's a really, really good question. I have to say I don't have any specific detailed insight but I do have some reflections to offer that are based on what is in the public domain thus far. First of all it's obviously within our gift, within the Government's gift to make decisions around the extent to which they will make provisions for this, but it does kind of go back to what I've been saying from the start, you know food standards and robust food standards are about public protection. The Government has repeatedly stated that it will not compromise on our food standards and on health protection, but it has, it has to be said, thus far singularly and spectacularly failed to legislate for that. And that goes back to the need for proper robust veterinary agreements and standards that I would argue, let's aim for surpassing the standards within the EU, let's have the best food and environmental standards in the World because that will ultimately add value to our food products.

And just to come back to something that Gail said and I have, you know, I think this is a different point but it's an important one, we are reliant currently on the rest of the world for our food supply and rather frustratingly for me personally from an environmental sustainability perspective we seem to send a lot of our very high quality products all around the world and then bring products in from other parts of the world to replace them. So there is data to indicate that, there's data that suggest that we actually export for example poultry and chicken products, fresh chicken in particular and then bring in fresh chicken to replace it from somewhere else and that just doesn't make any sense, to me anyway. So in the longer term we need a proper, robust food strategy for these islands. Again that's another piece of work but it is important to make that point I think.

So, to answer your question, the extent to which we make provision for this, it's within our gift to do it and I would argue that that would actually make us world leaders and increase the value of our food products in a global marketplace.

Dr Geoff Mackey

Gary, thanks very much, unfortunately the time I've got doesn't permit me to explore the question of food sustainability because frankly there's a number of us would love to get stuck into that for some hours. However, let me just move on and James, could I just pick up this question of competence when we talk about processes and checks and approvals, when we talk about your profession there's another conversation there, would you like to comment on that?

James Russell

I think perhaps the bit I would like to add to what Gary said is that you know we recognise that there is both a challenge here in terms of the commitment which was made in the Government manifesto to not allowing our farm health and welfare standards to be diminished by importing food that was produced to lower standards elsewhere and at the moment we don't see the opportunity for that commitment to be met in the SPS chapters of proposed trade agreements. But what we would see is an opportunity for us to just be a little bit more focused on GB's needs as well here as we think about these processes and what we're going to approve and what we're not.

And I can perhaps pick an example of that, we could be very industry specific and say look the EU doesn't have a significant outdoor pig population, the UK does. So, starting to think about health and welfare chapters which are particular to that pig industry and protect them from any kind of imported disease or challenge would be something that we would see a great opportunity for vets to engage and to help to deliver that in the future.

Dr Geoff Mackey

Thanks James, given the time I have Gail would the NFU like to have the last word on this one since we've moved in the direction of talking about food again as well.

Gail Soutar

I think it's a chapter which could take a long time, I'm very happy to come back to another session and talk at length about it. We obviously welcome the Trade and Agriculture Commission statutory attack, they called for experts to be established on Monday, like the other experts we are waiting to see for example the Australian FTA that's going to be agreed in principle, let's see whether the Government is actually translating its manifesto commitment into meaningful, genuine safeguards for our standards and our values because it's very great and I agree with Gary, it would be a very laudable ambition to have but if we are undercut by imports that have been produced to a much cheaper standard then that does nothing to keep British farmers in business and able to deliver those environmental goods that we know that British citizens want here in the UK, so it's a very complex subject and I think in the next week or so we will see some of the proof will be in the pudding let's say.

Dr Geoff Mackey

Thanks very much Gail, it would be remiss of me not to use the word educating the consumer to finish this particular conversation but I'll hand back happily to the Chair, thank you very much, Chairman.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much, Geoff.

Richard Griffiths

Chair, could I just chip in as a last sentence on that?

Sir Roger Gale MP

You may.

Richard Griffiths

I think the checks are absolutely essential, we have to recreate that system that the EU had as a whole and standards, as Gary said standards are essential and that approval process is the first step in ensuring our standards from imported product. Gary mentioned chicken, it's a really good example because we tend to export dark meat because we don't eat it, and import breast meat because that's what we like. So, but we are in danger of being undercut by lower standards, if we are not active in that process of approving third countries, we need to get good at this and get good at it quickly.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much, that's an issue that is going to be very much at the fore as has already been said in I suspect even the next few days. Question nine, Caroline Lucas please.

Caroline Lucas MP

Thank you very much Chair and in fact actually my question has been sort of touched on by all of you, so I guess I'm just inviting you to give any more detail. In terms of the risks of what we're talking about here because the question was really about what are the risks to the UK of the current situation in which there are few checks on food arriving from the EU and you've spoken about the pressure on lower standards, you've talked about public safety, you've talked Gary in particular about rising food crime. I wonder if you could just give a little bit more flesh on the bones of some of those concerns and maybe give a few examples, I was going to start with Gail and then come to Gary.

Gail Soutar

I'm very happy to defer to the other experts Caroline if that's OK?

Caroline Lucas MP

OK sure, let's go to Gary then.

Gary McFarlane

Thanks Caroline for the question, it's another, yet another really important area in my view. I actually just first of all on data, I actually had attempted in advance of this session to get some data on this pulled together for colleagues on the Committee, my sources haven't managed to get that yet but they have promised they will get it to me and when it comes to me I will make it available to all of you, but suffice to say, and it's quite interesting as some of you may, well many of you may be aware there is a National Food Crime Agency under the jurisdiction of the FSA, the capacity within that has been increased once we made the decision to leave the European Union. You can deduct from that what you will, but I know that, and this goes way back to my own experience practising on the ground, I mean and even just within the island of Ireland but it's a good example of why controls on borders are so important. Unfortunately the reality is that food crime is a very lucrative criminal activity, you know we all remember the horse meat scandal which of course thankfully did not have any public health implications, and I'm not suggesting that food crime in its totality or that all examples of food crime necessarily have public, direct public health implications, quite often they don't and it's about substitution of products that are not what they say they are, or are of lesser quality than they should be. But it is a very, very lucrative criminal activity.

And therefore, once there are gaps and I think that the movement, I know there's a question on this later on, the movement of goods from Northern Ireland and the GB is a particular area which you know would leave an open door in my view for criminals to potentially get products into GB, once you leave those doors open people will take advantage of them, unfortunately. So that I think is, you know we need to be clear that that is a reality that we're living with here and there are potentially risks to public health that could arise as a result of that. Particularly whenever you consider the whole matter of for example allergens within the food landscape. So, it's a really important thing to bear in mind in the context of this whole discussion. And I will get you that data whenever it's available.

Caroline Lucas MP

That data sounds like it will be really, really important. Thank you so much, I don't know if James or Richard wanted to add anything at this point? James, yeah.

James Russell

Thanks you Caroline and if I may, I think unsurprisingly I would come at this from an animal health angle potentially a little bit more, so you know we've already talked about the fact that the delays in import checks have been welcomed in terms of being able to set up the infrastructure required to undertake them and that the Chief Veterinary Officer continues to maintain those relationships to protect the country but you know we recognise there's going to be a period where for example live animal checks are not taking place at the Ports, at border control points and that's not ideal. If we think about the most recent diseases that have come into the country, we're talking about things like Blue Tongue and Schmallenberg disease which are diseases which are spread by insect vectors, by midges, so if you're having to transport those animals away into the country before they're being checked for that then it's not hard to see how that could make those borders a little bit more leaky.

And I think therefore you know that's what we're really trying to seek is assurances that we're not risking those diseases coming into the country by these delays because ultimately you know the line we keep going back with is that these diseases do not respect political borders and as vets that's I suppose where we want to sit. We recognise that the Trade Specialised Committee on Sanitary, Phytosanitary Measures where UK and EU can meet and discuss the operation of these arrangements is in place and so we implore the UK Government to continue to engage both with industry and with the veterinary profession to understand our priorities that they can take to those specialised committees.

Caroline Lucas MP

Thank you very much that's very worrying. Richard I don't know if you wanted to add anything?

Richard Griffiths

Just very quickly, I think this calls more than anything for a real risk based approach, we know what the risks are and they've been highlighted here, whether it's crime or it's animal health. We know what they are and they need to be focused on and it's why it's so important to go back to the whole veterinary agreement as to what we could do somewhere else in a different location and what we must do at the border, so risk based approach is essential here to my mind.

Caroline Lucas MP

Lovely, thank you all very much and back to you Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thanks Caroline, James you touched on something Aiden Connolly wanted to raise, he's asked me to raise it in his absence, do we have any idea, you referred to the checks being carried out now, how many checks are being carried out on movements, I'm talking about animal movements, between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, what increase in those checks if any is going to be imposed at the end of the grace period and are those numbers significantly greater than the checks currently imposed by the EU, do you know?

James Russell

Thank you Chair, very happy to take that and I think I would point you to the evidence given by Northern Ireland Chief Veterinary Officer Robert Huey to Eire Committee where he highlighted that he felt that in order to carry out the number of checks he was doing at the moment he needed another 12 vets and that that has not, he's not been able to recruit those people at the moment. At that time the DAERA Minister Edwin Poots suggested that 400 staff, of whom 200 would be vets would be needed after the grace period but we've yet to see the sort of evidence behind that. But you know, our best guess and Government's best guess I think is that the increase in export health certificates from GB to Northern Ireland at the end of the Stamney arrangements may be somewhere between 70 and 150,000 certificates per year, or roughly kind of 70 full time equivalent vets to just complete those certificates, so it's important I think always when we talk about full time equivalents to recognise that that's not just people working part-time or whatever, it's the fact that some of this work will happen out of hours, weekends or whatever and therefore the overall number of people that we need to carry out that work will be much greater than that, and DEFRA surveyed OVs themselves and identified that the average OV thought they might spend 15% of their time working on export work, so that's 70 full time equivalents could be you know somewhere up to 700 actual vets. So we recognise there is potentially a great demand but it is all estimates at the moment I'm afraid Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

How does that compare with the checks imposed by the EU?

James Russell

Again, I point to Robert's evidence where he highlighted that he anticipated that at the end of the Stamney period that Northern Ireland would be likely to be undertaking the majority of checks within the European Union.

Sir Roger Gale

Thank you very much indeed. Question 11, Hilary Benn please.

Hilary Benn MP

Thank you very much indeed Chair. Gary just a quick question to you to start with, you've said and we know that food crime is rife but presumably that's a risk whether we are or are not aligned with the EU's food and agri-food rules, is that right?

Gary McFarlane

Yes, it is, of course. But the point I was making is that the potential for criminals to look to exploit those opportunities, if you can call them opportunities, ultimately depends, I mean let me put it a different way, they will look at the landscape to determine how easy or how difficult it will be to get products that are either adulterated, are misdescribed, or are otherwise interfered with through controls. So, you know it's about how easy or difficult it actually is to get away with it.

Hilary Benn MP

Right OK, that's very helpful thank you. Secondly and I don't know whether James or Gail would like to respond do this, we obviously were aligned with the EU up to the 31st of December and there weren't all of these additional checks. We remain aligned because we haven't diverged, so the question I want to ask is from a risk point of view, what is the risk at the moment given that we're following the same rules that we were before that any food products, agri-food products going from GB to Northern Ireland could effectively undermine the integrity of the Single Market, and if I can just take the classic example because there's never really been a satisfactory answer, a Sainsbury lorry load of food going to one of its supermarkets, we know that if we get to the point where export health certificates are required that's a lot of items and a lot of cost. What is the actual risk of any of those products having turned up on the shelves being bought by consumers, taken home and consumed, of undermining the integrity of the Single Market, in the Republic. Would anyone like to offer a view? Yes, Gail.

Gail Soutar

I suppose flippantly I would say it's a question for the EU Chief Vet to answer rather than us because you're right, the risk hasn't presented itself and I'd say maybe yet, I guess speaking on behalf of what I hear from our European colleagues and I hear from the French farmers for example, they are very concerned about this, the idea that we do a deal with US or with Australia and there is in free circulation on the GB market product that doesn't adhere to EU standards, so you know.

Hilary Benn MP

That indeed is a very fair point, now my question was about now, today and clearly if we choose to diverge by accepting those products in any future US/UK trade deal then that would change the situation, but it is about today, what is the actual risk and since there has been a grace period, what is the argument about further, against further extending a grace period for now while we continue to observe all of the same rules and standards that we did before the 31st of December. I suppose the question, we haven't got an EU ... anyone who can speak on behalf of the EU in a veterinary form, but thank you for attempting to do so. Gary, I saw you waving your hand.

Gary McFarlane

Yeah, I think to try and tackle your question, I think you know obviously if we are still aligned, and incidentally, and again I would need to get the information on this, but colleagues have suggested that there actually has already been some divergence where there's been some changes to European standards and the directive from the UK Government is 'we adhere to the standards as they were on the 31st of December' so there is potentially some divergence. But leaving that aside, to answer your question if we're aligned with the EU then the risk is minimal. And that of course comes back to the point that we've referred to several times this morning in the importance moving forward of proper negotiated veterinary agreements. Because that is for me the single biggest thing that we could do to resolve some of the problems that are being experienced both in terms of the additional costs and strains on businesses as well as the increased capacity demands on those on the certifying side. I can see James's hand is up so I'll stop there.

Hilary Benn MP

Well James, I'll bring you in, but can I just pose a related question arising from what Gary has just said. To what extent could the number of checks, we're talking about the number of checks a lot this morning, ultimately carried out be reduced by either an equivalent agreement, i.e. we're going to show that we maintain the same standards or a joint veterinary zone, or I suppose both. How much of the problem would go away, we've heard the figure 80% talked about, do you think that's a fair number from your point of view James?

James Russell

I'm afraid I've not got a specific number to hand but you're absolutely right of course that an alignment agreement would see us absolutely mirror our regulations indefinitely and it's important to recognise of course that we are no longer directly aligned as Gary alluded to, you know we aligned from the 31st of December, there was a change in EU animal health laws on the 21st of April which is what brought in the requirement for the reportable diseases and so on from United Kingdom, from GB. I think it's perhaps also important to mention while I'm confusing GB and UK there, of course for these purposes Northern Ireland is the Single Market isn't it, so we've got to bear that in mind when we think about how we're going to continue to get goods right round the United Kingdom.

But the sort of flip side I think of what you're saying is if we do have this full regulatory alignment then it reduces the scope for the bespoke regulatory approaches within GB and I'm thinking back there again to the comments I made earlier about our outdoor pig industry for example but also the forthcoming European medicines legislation review that we're expecting towards the end of this year. It may be, I don't wish to sort of pre-judge anything that comes out of that but it may be that there are changes to medicines legislation within the EU which GB feels differently on the evidence of. So an alignment yes, it would reduce our need for checks but would also reduce our ability to take our own regulatory approach.

Hilary Benn MP

Thank you, that is really helpful. Back to you Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed. Paul Blomfield, question 12 please.

Paul Blomfield MP

Thank you very much Chair and I'd really like to take up from Hilary's points there and perhaps James's closing comment because obviously this whole debate is about the options that we have in relation to divergence or alignment of whatever sort, whether that's a Swiss style or a New Zealand style. Now, I sense all of the arguments we've heard this morning are that some form of alignment will solve the problems that we have going forward, clearly the UK Government is resistant to that, precisely because of the points James has just been making in terms of the opportunities provided through divergence. I get no sense within the farming and food sector that divergence would be welcome, but I wonder if you could say a little bit about the impact of divergence on the regulations governing food movement from GB and what that then begins to look like, and perhaps I could start with Richard.

Richard Griffiths

Yes, I think divergence it may depend on the extent or the type, but divergence broadly speaking would be disastrous for the trade between UK and EU. It would in effect mean that the systems that we have in place now, those burdensome checks at the border, would be here to stay, there would be no way around having those. When we were part of the EU we as members had to demonstrate, our food producers had to demonstrate that they were following the regulations, the idea now that we're outside of the EU and we've got this hard border, that's where the checks are. With a veterinary agreement we can maybe roll some of that back to say how can we demonstrate as part of our regular everyday processes that we are in alignment and therefore you don't need the checks. As soon as you diverge that's when the EU, and I would say quite rightly and if the roles were reversed we would say the same thing, no, you have different standards therefore we do not want your products coming into our area without it being checked that it meets our standards. So really that's the upshot of divergence in the practical sense, those hard borders will be there to stay.

Paul Blomfield MP

Thanks very much. Gail, I wonder if I could ask you what the farming community feels about the issue.

Gail Soutar

Yes, so I think the important starting point is the premise of what sort of relationship we're talking about with the EU, I don't necessarily agree that a veterinary agreement would require us to have alignment of regulations de facto or de jure, I think it's a more a question of focusing on the outcomes or the outcomes equivalents in terms of regulatory terms. If you look at New Zealand and UK you know they don't follow word by word exactly the same regulations to be able to unlock the benefits of the veterinary agreement. If you look at the Swiss model, again Switzerland is not de jure that they have to follow the letter of the EU law, they actually look at them on a sort of case by case basis and by and large they do, so on a de facto basis yes they do follow the EU rules but it's not de jure and I think at the heart of a lot of farmers' concerns is that we have taken back sovereign control of our rules, what we would want is to be able to look at the rules on a case by case basis to weight

up what it actually means, the cost, the benefit and by far the vast majority in terms of the benefits would be outweighed by the cost of the friction in terms of doing business with our largest export market. So the ability to be able to do that assessment as and when large significant pieces of legislation like the veterinary medicines directive that James talks about is what farmers want. They don't want to be rule takers, they don't want to be told that they have to follow the EU rules with no real ability to influence that and I think that's the same in Northern Ireland as well, the current situation. But what they want to be able to do is say well, where we have the same values, where we achieve the same outcomes we should be able to benefit from that and reduce the friction at the border.

So I think from a long answer to go back to the very start which is the premise of our relationship, the UK Government has said alignment, dynamic alignment is a red line for them but I think there are ways and means that you can achieve the same outcomes without having to fulfil dynamic alignment, which is what the EU is currently demanding. So there is this standoff in the negotiations and I think there is room for both sides to show willingness to move towards each other to find some solutions.

Paul Blomfield MP

Thanks very much, I mean you make a very important point there Gail because there is a perception that alignment means an unmoving straitjacket with no room at all, so if you're saying that even the Swiss model provides some opportunities for the sort of flexibility the sector might need that's an important point. I wonder Gary or James whether you have any reflections on the issue?

Gary McFarlane

Thanks Paul, I'm not sure that I've got a huge amount more to add to what Gail and Richard have already said. I think Gail is making an important point about ways and means to achieve the same thing and I think that is where we really need to focus our efforts because you know again I know I've said this repeatedly but that is for me the single most effective solution to all of this.

Paul Blomfield MP

James, do you have anything to add, I started my question by quoting your comments.

James Russell

Thank you and I guess what I'd almost like to do is put the flip of the comment that I just made to Hilary Benn which would be to reflect that you know in a nutshell greater divergence means greater risk means greater checks, so the closer that we remain to alignment the fewer those checks need to be. And again I would point back to the GB/Northern Ireland trade where back in December Robert Huey said to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that he'd found a way within the existing EU regs to reduce the level of the physical checks potentially down to zero for supermarket consignments and he'd done that in conjunction with the UK CVO, but he wouldn't be able to do that if GB diverged from EU regulation. But the other side to it I guess is that as we see potentially greater divergence the risks to our producers here of perhaps having dual certification or dual herds, where one is working to an EU standard, one is working to a GB standard in order to be able to satisfy both of those markets and I think that's something that I think we would have some real concerns about.

Paul Blomfield MP

Many thanks, back to you Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed Paul. Stephen Farry please, question 13. Stephen, do we have ...

Alison Williams

Hi Chair, it's Alison I think I'm allocated question 13 so I can jump in.

Sir Roger Gale MP

I beg your pardon, I've got Stephen Farry on my list but that's fine, go ahead.

Stephen Farry MP

I think Alison you're 14 on the trade barriers issue, they're probably the same issue I think ultimately. Thank you Chair, I just wanted to follow on from Paul's questions in relation to the forthcoming Australian free trade agreement, so-called, and the potential for a much longer spectrum the US free trade agreement and to maybe just ask the question, to what extent does either of those scenarios close off or limit our options in terms of the nature of any veterinary agreement we can have with the European Union. Presumably it majorly constrains the Swiss model but may still allow to a large extent the New Zealand approach, noting in this regard that we're perhaps talking very quickly about an Australia type of approach but the US administration is making clear that there's no real immediate prospect on that and their immediate preference is that the UK would align with the European Union on veterinary standards, not least for the Northern Ireland situation, so there's a fair degree of political aspects to this as well. So essentially to what extent are those free trade agreements mutually exclusive to our options on veterinary agreements. I may just ask Richard, Gail and Gary in that order.

Richard Griffiths

I think the basis of the free trade agreements and where we as a sector come from is that what we're asking for is a level playing field, happy to compete with other countries on a level playing field of standards and to be able to ensure that. I think a veterinary agreement can be as wide or as narrow as you want it to be, it can focus on specific issues in our own area, it might be avian influenza or other animal health diseases or it could be broader into as we've been talking about the food and farming. I don't think the free trade agreements would necessarily limit the scope of veterinary agreements, that's a very sweeping statement, but what I think the big threat from free trade agreements is back to standards and what we don't want to do is create essentially a two-tier food system within the UK which then that could have further implications for veterinary agreements, as has been mentioned the EU may not want to run the risk of having Australian beef come to them through the UK.

Stephen Farry MP

That's presumably where this does become a pressure point.

Richard Griffiths

It does and chlorinated chicken keeps getting mentioned again and again, our area of expertise, but again we would like to see the level playing field in the first instance, not having to repair it with veterinary agreements or other machinations after the fact. Protect the standards first, then deal with the further agreements and negotiations.

Stephen Farry MP

Thanks Richard, and Gail and then Gary.

Gail Soutar

Yeah thank you, so I agree with Richard, it's unlikely to be the text of the free trade agreement itself, obviously we'll be looking very closely at the SPS chapters and what they say but I would very much doubt that the UK after having hard fought, won their independence to regulate post-Brexit that it would then give it up very quickly to Australia, so I doubt it will be the international treaty itself that the thing we'll need to watch for. It will however be if for example tariffs are removed on beef or on chicken from the US and it becomes a much more commercially attractive proposition to send that product to the UK it's at that point our secondary legislation will come under pressure, you will get applications to the Food Standards Agency to authorise new decontaminants, material for carcasses, you will probably get an application to allow certain growth promoters in the use of beef and that's why we are really concerned at the NFU that the level of scrutiny that we have in Parliament around the consequences of free trade agreements has been a real point of concern for us and hopefully these are the sorts of things that the Trade and Agriculture Commission will flag when they see these international treaties.

I take the example of, I can't off the top of my mind remember if it was hormone beef or chlorinated chicken, it was one or the other one, to change that rule in UK law, secondary legislation, it just requires a negative SI procedure and the likelihood of there being a debate in Parliament and it being turned over if the UK decided that that product was safe is probably minimal, but we sort of jump ahead of ourselves many, many moves down the line. So it's not necessarily the trade deal itself, it's what could follow in the secondary legislation. Under the trade deal and what I suspect the EU would be looking at very robustly is the rules of origin, you then start to see the play between SPS and customs legislation coming in and if they think that Australian product is in pre-circulation in our market, just a cheaper environmental standards, animal welfare standards, it can undercut their producers then they will be really looking to enforce the rules of origin to make sure that that Australian beef does not end up on their European market.

Stephen Farry MP

Thanks, and Gary.

Gary McFarlane

Thanks Stephen, I think really again just to emphasize the points that both Richard and Gail have made, Richard is absolutely right it's about standards at the heart of this, you know and you have to ask yourself the question why are neither of these trade agreements within scope currently, or rather why are they not, were they not currently within the scope of the previous EU arrangements

whenever we were part of the EU, I mean ask yourself that question. And without actually going through the actual standards themselves as pertaining to the different countries, I suspect the reason is because they wouldn't have met the European standards.

Now to give you a more practical organic example of this and it will illustrate what Gail's talking about and why this will in my view make agreements moving forward more difficult with the EU. Gail has already talked about these kind of products undercutting our own because the standard, they're produced to cheaper standards and lesser animal welfare arrangements and so on and so forth. Now, a lot of these products are likely to be brought in and end up in what are called composite products, in other words what I mean is meat products or meat preparations, it doesn't matter what kind of meat it is. And what I mean by that in laypersons terms is products that contain meat but are not whole cuts of meat, which then may subsequently be attempted to be exported to other parts of the world, and that's why you know because of the complications and the difficulties around tracing all of that, that's why I suspect that if those agreements go ahead it is highly likely in my view that it will make it more difficult to resolve some of the current difficulties we have with the EU exports. And the EU will in my view increase the ante, up the ante if you like on what they will require.

And there's a final point to make with that as well which is much has been ... I mean we're referred to the issue of consumer choice when it comes to these kind of products and you know the Government will say well consumers have the choice to choose whether they consume products from Australia, New Zealand, America or in fact any other part of the world as oppose to consuming products which originate here, but that's actually not as straightforward as it sounds, the labelling legislation is very convoluted, it's very complex, it's not always necessarily easy but more importantly these kind of products will not end up on supermarket shelves, they'll end up in the NHS and in our schools.

Stephen Farry MP

OK thanks to all for the answers, back to you Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed, Alison I apologise, I think the questions may have been renumbered since you got them, but you do have the final question and it may prove to be the most important one of them all, so the floor is yours.

Alison Williams

Thank you, so well thank you first of all to all the witnesses, everything you've talked through today has been incredibly helpful to understand the challenges that your areas and industries are facing. You have I think all of you have touched on some of the things that could help ease or address those challenges, what would be really good to close with is just to go through your top recommendations, so what are the one or two things that really would make the biggest impact to overcome the barriers that you've described. So it would be great to hear from each of you, if we can start with Gail and then we'll go to Richard, James and Gary. Thank you.

Gail Soutar

Thank you Alison, I think my three top recommendations I would have, number one UK Government please continue to engage constructively with the EU on securing a way that we can reduce as much as possible the friction that is in place between our trading nations at the moment. I don't necessarily want to get hung up on whether that's a New Zealand style veterinary agreement, a Swiss style model, we are in a bespoke situation, we are the closest major market for the EU, it's on both sides interests to try and get a very bespoke, robust agreement that seeks to minimise as much friction as possible.

My second would be around adequate resourcing by the Government, yes there have been efforts to help exporters but more can be done, whether that is listening to experts like James and Richard and Gary to ensure that in their professions you have the right qualified staff, you know if you need to look at the immigration rules or if you need to look at routes to employment please find ways to ensure that there is adequate resources to meet the needs of the export industry.

And finally just clear communications for a micro business to be able to navigate the complexity of this all the while hopefully it will get better it is incredibly complex, more one stop shops, more dedicated resources to help those micro businesses and small and medium sized enterprises to be able to get back into the export business. So that would be my three.

Alison Williams

That's great thank you, very clear. Richard.

Richard Griffiths

Well thank you I wouldn't go too much further than that and the recommendations in the SPS report, but I think it's really important to recognise that as important as the discussion today has been, we're trying to fix the affects of something. If we're really serious should go and try and fix the cause of some of these and that comes back I think to standards, we have to be clear about what we want our standards to be, we all as professional have an opinion on that, as a nation we have to be clear about what our standards are and accept the consequences of that, but the sort of jumping around and shall we do a deal here, shall we do a deal, is not going to help anyone. I think the standards will then drive everything else that we have to do and everything else that we can do in the future.

Alison Williams

Thank you. James.

James Russell

Thank you and I've got three fronts that we would extol the Government to make their concerted efforts across and in building into those if I may just refer back to Stephen's question a moment ago and highlight that whenever, whatever I talk about here it's really important I think that we engage the certifiers and the industry as a matter of paramount importance and the reason I say that refers back to Stephen's question is recognising that at the moment FSA, Food Standards Association and Food Standards Scotland are being held up as those who can ensure that any food coming in under any trade agreement meets the standards that we would expect within the United Kingdom and of course that's absolutely true for food safety, that it would not be their primary remit to be considering animal health and welfare.

So, in order to get us to that position we would say our three areas would be that the UK simplifies whatever is in its gift to simplify, whether that's digitalisation or working with business to provide different ways of getting the information to the certifying vet quickly. Secondly having a close look at what can be achieved within the trade cooperation agreement and under the Northern Ireland protocol and that might be about using innovation to improve assurance or automating parts of the process, but ultimately recognising that as we said earlier Northern Ireland isn't the back door into the EU Single Market, it is in the Single Market, GB is the back door, so we've got to provide assurance to the EU to enable easy transport of goods to Northern Ireland.

And finally the comment that understand what industry needs to build a model that works for it and it won't be the New Zealand model or the Switzerland model, it will be a bespoke model that we will need to build that works for GB.

Alison Williams

Thank you, it sounds like there's a lot of alignment on the recommendations so far. So just finally to Gary please.

Gary McFarlane

Thanks Alison, yeah I have only a few additional comments to make to what Richard and Gail and James have just said. I totally agree with Richard, I think the standards are absolutely the top of the list here, totally agree with what he said. The only thing I would add to that is don't forget that it's not just about food standards, it's about environmental standards as well, because the two are fundamentally linked. And the EU would take that view as well, I know that from past engagement with them on this. The point about streamlining we talked about particularly streamlining at a pragmatic level, trying to streamline the administration around this but whilst still maintaining its integrity and I think finally I think that you know we could look at maybe some greater flexibility in who carries out what checks in the UK, it's important to make the point that the UK doesn't just have veterinarians it has environmental health professionals and that is quite unique within the EU, it's important for the Committee, the Commission to understand that, the rest of the EU don't have EHPs and that's part of the reason why the requirements in their original form stipulated veterinarians. So you know we could look, I mean if you apply a risk assessment model to this there are different levels of risk associated with different types of processes, products, food stuff and so on and so forth, so there's maybe scope for some greater flexibility which would help in some way around with our capacity issues.

Alison Williams

That's great thank you, it's that kind of detail that we really need to draw out in these sessions so thank you for raising that. OK thanks all for your answers, back to the Chair.

Sir Roger Gale MP

Thank you very much indeed, if I can editorialise momentarily, when we left the European Union we were told that it would be the opportunity to ensure that we did not import goods, particularly food stuffs, produced under conditions that we would not permit in the United Kingdom, that comes back to standards and that is absolutely vital and that is one of the clear messages that has come through this morning.

Gail Soutar, James Russell, Gary McFarlane, Richard Griffiths, thank you all very much indeed for participating and for giving us your time this morning. The Commission is indebted to you and I hope that your views will be, in fact I know that your views will be fairly reflected in the report that we ultimately produce. Meeting closed.