

Food & Farming

Food standards: Dual-tariff system planned rather than bans

Imports of US foods produced to lower welfare standards could be permitted in the UK under a “dual-tariff” regime. Products that do not comply with UK welfare standards would be subjected to high import tariffs whilst those imports produced to equivalent standards would be subject to lower tariffs, giving British farmers a competitive advantage. The dual-tariff system has been adopted as the UK’s position at a ministerial meeting and will be proposed to US officials as part of ongoing negotiations. It is seen as a major victory for Environment Secretary George Eustice over International Trade Secretary Liz Truss. Ms Truss had proposed reducing tariffs to zero over 10 years. It remains to be seen how US negotiators will receive the proposal.

Banning a product based upon its method of production is not allowed under WTO rules if the physical characteristics of the final product are not affected by the method of production. This is one reason the government resisted attempts to insert a legally binding commitment to protect UK food standards into the Agriculture Bill. Rather than an outright ban the government’s plan is to try and steer importers’ behaviour using a dual-tariff system. This strategy has parallels to how the EU uses tariff rates to allow imports of high quality grass-fed beef, whilst deterring lower value cuts (known informally as Hilton quota beef). Its impact would ultimately depend upon the level at which the tariffs are set, whether they are effective at deterring imports produced to lower standards, and if the lower rate tariff on higher quality goods genuinely places UK producers at a competitive advantage against those imports.

Negotiations for a UK-Japan Free Trade Agreement began on 9 June. The existing EU-Japan deal is being used as a model and an ambitious timeline followed which aims to secure a deal that will come into force by the end of 2020. Negotiations will be conducted remotely, via videoconference, across six working groups. The UK is being represented by around 100 negotiators.

New Red Tractor labels

Red Tractor Food Assurance has launched a new range of farming marques to help communicate clearly with shoppers and diners which production method has been used for their food. The new marques retain the union flag, alongside an updated tractor graphic with a heart in the wheel and a ‘tick’ to indicate that the product has been checked. The words “Certified Standards” will be replaced with the farming method used and each will be associated with a colour:

- Orange: Free range for chicken
- Purple: Enhanced welfare for chicken
- Green: Organic

The “enhanced welfare for chicken” is a newly developed module. In addition to the core Red Tractor standards, the module requires growers to use a slower growing chicken breed, provide more space and natural light to encourage natural behaviours, and reduce stocking density from 38kg/m² to 30kg/m².

Small abattoirs are critical

The government has been urged to recognise the critical role small abattoirs play in allowing farmers to add value to their products, underpinning farm shops and direct selling. Lord Trees, Co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare says “immediate action is needed to prevent further closures”. The group’s report on the [Future for Small Abattoirs](#) makes a number of recommendations including:

- Making small abattoirs eligible for capital payments in any future agricultural support framework
- Ensuring abattoirs are recognised by public bodies as essential infrastructure supporting the rural economy
- Funding waste disposal or re-usage technology as part of environmental schemes
- Consider low capacity abattoirs to be agricultural buildings with respect to business rates and building control.

Covid-19

Reopening tourism

In England the hospitality sector has been told not to expect any easing of the rules until 4 July at the earliest, although outdoor elements of some leisure attractions such as zoos and safari parks may reopen from 15 June. A consortium of organisations including the Local Government Association and National Trust have published [management guidance](#) to help those responsible for green space and country parks manage public access in accordance with government rules.

A provisional date of 15 July has been set for tourism businesses in Scotland to reopen. Tourism Secretary Fergus Ewing said it was conditional upon moving to the third phase of their route map for easing lockdown restrictions. He announced a taskforce focused on the sector's recovery needs. VisitScotland has advised businesses to adapt to the post-lockdown demands of tourists, and predict that "self-isolating" holidays will be in demand. VisitScotland also suggested that some resorts could offer luxury "isolationist" breaks for overseas visitors who have to quarantine. According to its senior insight manager Chris Greenwood, there is "pent-up demand" which could see a "strong recovery" for Scotland's domestic market this year. Recognising a potential tension between tourism businesses and other people in rural communities, Mr Greenwood said that social distancing will still be "a key part of their psyche", making the first wave of tourists more cautious.

Many businesses in the tourism and leisure sector have warned that it will not be economically viable for them to open unless the 2 metre social distancing rule changes. Their industry bodies and backbench MPs have been lobbying the UK's governments to review their rules. Several countries, such as China, France and Denmark have reduced the distance to 1 metre in line with World Health Organisation guidance. Other countries including Australia, Germany and Italy have a 1.5 metre rule, while in the US it is 1.8 metres. Canada and Spain match the UK with a 2 metre restriction. Dr Gregor Smith, Scotland's chief medical officer, has warned that decreasing the 2 metre distance would increase the risk of the virus spreading, a view which has been echoed by scientific advisors in Westminster too. The prime minister's official spokesman has said the rule is being "kept under constant review".

Scotland: Small business support

Small businesses which share properties but do not pay business rates are now eligible to apply for Covid-19 grant support. The [Small Business Grant Fund](#) now covers firms occupying shared office spaces, business incubators or shared industrial units which lease the space from a registered, rate-paying landlord. Grants worth up to £10,000 will be made available for eligible businesses. The Small Business Grant and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant schemes will close to new applicants on 10 July. The schemes have paid over £824 million to 72,622 businesses across Scotland although applications have slowed recently.

Dairy support fund opens soon

The support fund for English dairy farmers whose income has been affected by disruption to milk demand and supply chains caused by Covid-19, opens on 18 June. Farmers will be able to apply for a single payment of up to £10,000, based upon 70% of their lost income. To be eligible, farmers will need to demonstrate that they have suffered a reduction in the average price paid for their milk of 25% or more in April 2020 when compared with February 2020. The funding will then be paid out from 6 July. Equivalent support is available in Wales. If you would like to discuss dairy support please contact [Adrian Matthews](#).

Emergency heritage fund

Historic England has launched a second emergency fund to support the heritage sector's recovery from the effects of Covid-19. The Covid-19 Emergency Heritage at Risk Response Fund will award grants of up to £25,000 to fund the urgent maintenance of England's historic sites and buildings. Historic England has found that the most common impact of Covid-19 on the heritage sector has been the loss or postponement of work. Craft workers, like stonemasons and glaziers, and professionals such as architects and surveyors have been the hardest hit; 78% say that without support their business will fail by October. Historic England hopes that the £3 million emergency fund will kick start projects, helping to provide work for these important crafts.

Policy

A green recovery is on the agenda

To support economic recovery Business Secretary Alok Sharma has announced five "recovery roundtables" to consider support measures over the next 18 months. The working groups are:

- The future of industry
- Green recovery
- Backing new businesses
- Increasing opportunity
- The UK open for business.

The recovery roundtables formally place the concept of a green recovery on the government's agenda. Greenpeace has just [published its views](#) on how a green recovery can be achieved. It argues that priority areas for the government should be redesigning the transport system, making UK buildings fit for the 21st century, delivering a clean power system and finally supporting nature and creating a circular economy. This would involve supporting sustainable agricultural livelihoods by maintaining support at £2.6 billion per year for the new Environmental Land Management scheme until at least 2027. Greenpeace also wants to see at least an additional £800 million per year over the next three years for projects to enhance existing habitats and create new ones (including reforestation) across the UK.

Post-pandemic super-inquiry launched

The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Committee has launched a super inquiry on post-pandemic economic growth. It will cover investment, industrial strategy, jobs, skills, exports and sustainable growth. This overarching inquiry is likely to run throughout parliament and will include a series of sub-inquiries such as devolution and the 'levelling-up' agenda. The Committee is [inviting](#) written submissions.

Environment & Natural Capital

Managing woodlands in a climate emergency

New climate change management [guidance](#) has been released by the Forestry Commission to provide practical advice to landowners in England on ways they can better manage their woodland to combat the effects of climate change. It advises how decisions on species selection, rotation length and diversity can be used to adapt woodlands and forests to climate change. If you would like to discuss woodland establishment and management please contact [Mark Townsend](#).

Studies confirm the importance of access to nature

Natural England's People and Nature Survey for England, and RSPB research both confirm the essential role that access to nature plays in peoples' wellbeing. The People and Nature Survey for England found that in April, nearly half of adults (49%) reported taking a visit to a green and natural space within the previous 14 days. Urban green spaces, such as parks and playing fields, were the most visited type of green and natural space, with 41% of adults reporting that they had visited those places. The vast majority (87%) of all those surveyed said being in nature makes them happy. The RSPB [research](#) found strong public support for access to nature, with people seeing it as important for health and wellbeing both during and after the Covid-19 crisis. 84% of people support an increase in the number of accessible nature-rich areas in the UK and four out of five people are opposed to a decrease in spending on nature. More than three quarters of people also support the notion that nature could contribute to the economic recovery of the UK.

Nature-rich habitats offset carbon

Restoring important habitats will not just help nature but also reduce and even offset UK carbon emissions. [New research](#) has quantified the carbon stored in the vegetation and top 30cm of soil of habitats recognised for their conservation potential. It is estimated these areas store 0.55 gigatonnes of carbon and sequester an additional 8.7 million tonnes of CO₂e per year. But much of this land is in poor condition and two thirds lack any form of protection, meaning around 3 million tonnes of CO₂e is currently lost each year through degradation. The research was predominantly focused on peatland and heath. Restoring these habitats to a good condition will benefit nature and increase carbon sequestration to 14.6 million tonnes of CO₂e per year, almost equivalent to the annual emissions of four coal fired power stations or a third of the annual emissions from agriculture. Dr Rob Field, lead author of the study, said "this is likely to be a conservative estimate, and if we were to consider other nature-rich habitats, the figure is likely to be higher".

Property & Development

Ban on evictions extended

To support tenants whose income has been affected due to Covid-19, the government has extended the ban on residential evictions in England by two months. It will now run for a total of five months, ending on 23 August. New rules are also being developed to ensure vulnerable renters, such as those shielding from coronavirus, are protected when the suspension on evictions ends.

Scotland: Fair Rents Bill introduced

The [Fair Rents Bill](#) introduced to the Scottish parliament on 1 June aims to control residential rent levels. If passed the Bill will limit rent increases to no more than the annual Consumer Prices Index ("CPI") plus 1%. Ministers will have the power to vary the additional percentage, including imposing a negative percentage. Tenants will be allowed

to apply to the rent officer for a “fair open market rent” to be determined for their property. Landlords will be required to declare details of the rent they charge in the Scottish Landlord Register which will be publicly available.

Electrical safety standards

Landlords have been reminded of the new electrical safety standards that came into force on 1 June for all new tenancies. Existing tenancies must comply from 1 April 2021. The [Electrical Safety Standards in the Private Rented Sector Regulations 2020](#) require landlords to have the electrical installations in their properties inspected at least every five years by a professional with the relevant qualifications. They must also provide a copy of the Electrical Safety Condition Report (EICR) to tenants and the local authority if requested.

Other Rural News

Biggest UK solar plant approved

Approval has been given to construct a 958 acre solar farm near the north Kent coast. The £450 million project is expected to produce 350MW from 880,000 solar panels, enough to power to 91,000 homes. The Cleve Hill Solar Park will be located close to Faversham and generate £1 million annually for Kent and Swale councils. It will also reduce UK carbon emissions by 68,000 tonnes, equivalent to the annual emissions of nearly 15,000 vehicles.

Despite seemingly positive climate credentials, the installation has been fiercely opposed by many local people and has divided green groups. Helen Whately, MP for Faversham, has said the scheme “would destroy an entire landscape” and claimed the project was “industrialising” the countryside. Greenpeace, the RSPB and the countryside charity CPRE are all against the plan, with the CPRE saying the proposed battery storage system has caused fires and explosions around the world. Developers Wirsol Energy and Hive Energy say it is safe. Friends of the Earth offered qualified support, on the grounds that the current intensively-farmed land was bad for wildlife anyway. Its spokesperson Mike Childs said “changing the use of the site from intensive agriculture will reduce the high level of chemicals currently harming insects and wildlife”.

And finally...

You must be kidding...

Is the novelty of Zoom calls starting to wear off? Finding them a bit dull? For just £5 you can liven them up a bit with a 10-minute appearance from a goat. What started as “a bit of a joke” has now become a serious business venture with the goats from Cronkshaw Fold farm in Lancashire able to appear on as many as 100 calls a day. So far, they have been to a rave in Berlin, a birthday party in New Zealand and a church service every Sunday. Virtually, of course. The goats are all in pens as it is kidding season, making it convenient for filming, but also giving people the added bonus of seeing the newborns.

If you have queries regarding any of the articles, please contact Andrew Teanby.

Contacts



Andrew Teanby
Associate Director
ateanby@savills.com
+44 (0) 1522 507 312



Emily Norton
Head of Rural Research
emily.norton@savills.com
+44 (0) 207 016 3786

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