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A Common Veterinary Area between Great Britain and the EU / Northern Ireland

What is a Common Veterinary Area (CVA)?

A common veterinary area (CVA) provides a common space for the control of animal diseases, the trade in animals and products of animal origin and the import of these animals and products from third countries.

Such an area exists between Switzerland and the EU¹, ensuring that EU and Swiss regulations on the prevention of epizootic diseases are consistent and lead to the same outcomes. The resulting veterinary area allows for equivalent trading conditions for both partners. The Swiss example demonstrates how such an agreement can maintain trade flows and reduce technical obstacles to trade by reducing or even removing non-tariff trade barriers.

Why we need a CVA between Great Britain and the EU/Northern Ireland

Under the Withdrawal Agreement, the single animal health and veterinary zone is maintained across the island of Ireland, subject to the periodic consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly². This means that any animals or animal derived products travelling from Great Britain to the island of Ireland - whether it is traveling to Northern Ireland or Ireland - will have to undergo full inspections in line with EU rules. Businesses importing and exporting animal products have already been impacted by the need for sanitary and phytosanitary checks on meat and plant products, respectively and by the requirement for signed export health certificates for each animal or food consignment, even under the light-touch regulation scheme currently in place. This is already leading to delays and complexity which is likely to get worse as the UK introduces full checks, although as it stands the UK has announced the grace period will be extended moving from the end of March to October this year. This has been set out as a "temporary" technical step to provide more time for businesses to adapt to and implement the new requirement.

The UK Cabinet member Lord David Frost said the UK's intervention should allow time for constructive discussions with counterparts in Brussels and the EU Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovic has indicated an interest in exploring a UK-EU veterinary agreement. TAWC sees this as a real opportunity to agree a CVA which will be welcomed by businesses on both sides. Such a veterinary area would then alleviate the need for any additional checks, whilst still allowing for targeted or intelligence-led checks to prevent non-compliant movement as necessary. This would help maintain movement, including within the UK (between Northern Ireland and Great Britain), whilst reducing needless stress for the animals and safeguarding a high standard of animal health and welfare.

The Situation Without a CVA

In October, when the grace period will end, inspections at ports of entry into the EU or Northern Ireland will become more laborious, slow, and are likely to present real threats to animal welfare. Any such inspections, also coupled with entry and exit declarations, will invariably cause significant delays,

¹ As established by Annex 11 of the bilateral Agreement on trade in agricultural products between Switzerland and the EU is known as the Veterinary Annex or the "Veterinary Agreement"

² Article 18, Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

and with them stress for the animals involved. Furthermore, measures for non-compliant shipments into the EU and Northern Ireland will either see animals re-dispatched to Great Britain, placed into quarantine, or destroyed entirely.

Richard Ballantyne, chief executive of the trade body British Ports Association (BPA), has been clear about Border Control Posts (BCPs) not being even near ready and NFU has expressed concerns that there is no planning for facilities to check incoming farm animals.³ The new BCPs both at EU and Northern Irish ports need to be capable of dealing with varied species of animals, not least equines, and that will require facilities to manage that process. For instance, any consignments of less than ten equines would need to be unloaded. Furthermore, while only ten percent of consignments with ten equines or more need to be checked, it is likely all animals will need to be unloaded if there is no way to access them on the transport vehicle⁴. Without appropriately trained personnel, such procedures could put welfare at risk. Whilst intelligence checks and occasional spot checks are needed, such a routine approach is disproportionate to the risk.

All live animals are only able to enter the EU and Northern Ireland through those BIPs that have been approved for the species and categories of animals concerned. Each consignment has to be accompanied by a duly completed health certificate in compliance with EU animal health import legislation⁵. The animals have to undergo documentary, identity and physical checks as they are only be allowed to enter with an official document (Common Veterinary Entry Document) attesting that the border checks were satisfactorily carried out in compliance with the applicable animal and public health rules. A Common Veterinary Area can avoid all of these requirements, which would mean less checks and less stress for the animals. Resources can be used for enforcement agencies to focus on breaches of animal welfare more broadly.

What we are calling for

TAWC would like to see a standalone veterinary agreement negotiated, between the UK and the EU, establishing a common veterinary area covering the EU and Northern Ireland on one side and Great Britain on the other.

Such an agreement should cover:

- the control of certain animal diseases and their notification
- trade between Great Britain and the EU/NI in living animals for competition and breeding purposes, animal sperm, egg cells and embryos and animal products (milk and dairy products, meat and meat products)
- the import of these animals and products from other territories into the veterinary area
- A provision for the dynamic alignment of future standards adopted by either territory. That is to say if one territory were to adopt new legislation, thereby raising the bar of animal health in a certain sector, the other should ensure that it provides for a similar standard according to their own requirements.

The governance and correct implementation of the CVA should come under the responsibility of a specialised Joint Veterinary Committee⁶ comprising chief veterinary officers or appropriate veterinary experts or animal health officials, including from all four UK administrations, itself under the remit of the Joint Committee established by the Withdrawal Agreement (which has ultimate responsibility in overseeing the functioning of the Northern Ireland Protocol⁷).

³<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/mar/07/british-ports-say-they-are-not-ready-for-brex-it-customs-checks>

⁴ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/2129

⁵ Article 4 of Council Directive 91/496/EEC

⁶ See Article 164(4)(b) of the Withdrawal Agreement

⁷ Joint Committee - as established by Article 164 of the Withdrawal Agreement

About the Trade & Animal Welfare Coalition (TAWC)

The following organisations work together in a coalition to ensure that opportunities to protect and advance animal welfare through the future relationship between the UK and the EU.

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