

Barriers to British Farm Profitability: Impact of Lower-Standard Imports

While there is a need to improve animal welfare standards domestically, some UK farming sectors already produce food under some of the higher environmental, animal welfare and food safety standards in the world. This, however, is undermined by imports raised under weaker rules - a problem that must be dealt with by comprehensive legislation. UK industry bodies and NGOs have emphasised that any food allowed into Britain should meet "the same high standards" as domestic produce, or else farmers will be forced to compete against "imported food produced in ways that would be illegal in this country." Lower-welfare food forces UK farmers into "unfair competition" that could push them into lowering standards and prices and make profitability much more difficult.

Of the UK's 88 trading partners that can currently, or may soon, export animal products to the UK without tariffs, 84 (95%) have lower animal welfare standards than the UK.

Farming organisations regularly cite falling farmgate prices and lost market share. The National Sheep Association (NSA) has highlighted how Australian sheep meat imports are rising, with Australian lamb production breaking records, while UK sheepmeat output slumped to a 39-year record low in 2024. NSA Policy Manager Michael Priestley expressed frustration that UK flocks (already hit by bad weather and disease) were being undercut, warning: "it's not acceptable for food to be imported that could not legally be produced domestically due to lower welfare standards. It's duplicitous, and unfair on consumers, animals, and farmers." Australian lamb imports rose 47% in 2024 to 19,300 tonnes, with the quota level set to reach 75,000 tonnes by 2032.

In general terms, analysts and campaigners argue that imports at lower standards distort UK markets. The Landworkers' Alliance cautions that rising imports can drive farmers out of business unless counter-measures (like tariffs or quotas) are used. Sustain similarly warns that failing to enforce equivalent standards on imports will soon leave UK farmers "undermined by more low standard imports."

For TAWC, a major concern is imports of animal products raised under standards not allowed in the UK. UK farmers often invest more in welfare (e.g. free-range systems) and when cheaper imports can bypass these costs, domestic producers struggle to compete.

Examples of current imports to the UK:

- **Pork:** Over 50% of pork consumed in the UK is imported, representing 613,957 tonnes in 2024, equivalent to approximately 6.4 million pigs annually
- **Eggs:** UK imports totaled 91,571 tonnes in 2024, representing the equivalent of 8 million layer hens
- **Sheep meat:** The UK imported 67,878 tonnes in 2024, equivalent to approximately 4.8 million animals
- **Poultry:** The UK imports nearly half its poultry meat — 1,006,626 tonnes in 2024, equating to approximately 570 million chickens annually

Since the election, Defra has repeatedly committed to "protect farmers from being undercut by low welfare and low standards in trade deals." The recently released government trade strategy committed to upholding high animal welfare standards and specifically recognised concerns about production methods like sow stalls and battery cages that are banned in the UK, promising to use the full range of powers including quotas, exclusions and safeguards to protect sensitive sectors.

While the recent India trade deal included protections for animal welfare standards in sensitive sectors, new concerns arise with Canada's commitment to ratify the UK's CPTPP membership in the second half of 2025. Around half of the pork eaten in Britain now comes from countries that still permit sow stalls and other practices banned in the UK, and Canada represents a particular concern as about 70% of Canadian breeding sows were still confined in crates as of 2021.

Comprehensive legislation is needed to address all low-welfare imports systematically, only allowing the sale of products that meet British standards.

Case studies

1. Eggs (UK Standard: Battery Cages banned since 2012, approximately 20% of hens in enriched cages)

Import Source: EU

Impact: While current imports largely come from EU countries with similar standards, future trade agreements pose significant risks. The UK saw an 8% decline in egg production in 2022, followed by a 10% drop in 2023. With Canada set to ratify the UK's CPTPP membership in the second half of 2025, there are concerns about imports from countries where battery cages remain legal and are only scheduled to be phased out by 2036, compared to the UK's complete ban since 2012.

2. Lamb (UK Standard: High-Welfare, Hill-Reared)

Import Source: Australia (26%), with concerns about increasing imports following the UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement

Impact: Following the UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement, Australian lamb imports rose 47% in 2024 to 19,300 tonnes, with the quota level set to reach 75,000 tonnes by 2032. The Government's own impact assessment projected a 5% reduction in UK sheep meat production as a result of the Australia deal. Meanwhile, UK sheepmeat output slumped to a 39-year record low in 2024. This is concerning because live lamb cutting (mulesing) remains common in Australia, with 44% of sheep subjected to this painful procedure without anaesthetic. The UK banned this practice in 2010 due to animal welfare concerns.

3. Pork (UK Standard: No Sow Stalls, Farrowing crates still permitted)

Import Source: EU Netherlands (23%), Denmark (20%), Germany (13%), Ireland (10%) -- where EU countries allow sow stalls for up to 28 days per pregnancy cycle

Impact: More than half of all pork sold in the UK is imported from systems that allow sow stalls, which have been banned in the UK on animal welfare grounds since 1999. With Canada's planned CPTPP ratification, this concern intensifies as about 70% of Canadian breeding sows were still confined in crates as of 2021, and sow stalls remain legal under certain conditions. UK pig farmers argue that they are forced to compete unfairly with cheaper, lower-welfare imports. This leads to suppressed domestic prices, putting pressure on the profitability of UK pig farming.

4. Poultry (UK Standard: Littered Floors Required, Stocking Density Limits)

Import Sources: Poland (26%), Thailand (19%), Netherlands (17%), Germany (6%), Ireland (5%), Brazil (5%)

Impact: With Canada's imminent ratification of the UK's CPTPP membership, there are concerns about increased imports from countries with weaker standards. Canada has no legally mandated maximum stocking density for broilers and permits practices like conscious shackling that would violate UK welfare

laws.

Further concerns arise from the UK's ongoing negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where there are no stocking density limits and mandatory stunning before slaughter is not required - meaning animals are typically conscious during slaughter, unlike UK requirements which mandate stunning with some religious exemptions. The GCC's rapid agricultural expansion, with Saudi Arabia investing £3.5 billion in poultry expansion targeting export surplus generation, creates additional future risks for UK producers.

4. Beef (UK Standard: Grass-Fed, Lower Carbon)

Import Source: Mexico – associated with deforestation and high carbon emissions

Impact: Under new trade agreements, imports of Mexican beef—produced under lower environmental and welfare standards could be imported. UK farmers warn that such imports undermine efforts to maintain a low-carbon, sustainable beef industry. Campaigners have pointed out that accepting lower-standard beef “won’t help UK farmers or food security echoed concerns, noting that such practices contradict the UK’s climate commitments and place domestic producers at a competitive disadvantage.

Solutions to protect and support domestic farmers

1. Implement Equivalent Import Standards Legislation

- Legislation requiring animal products sold in the UK to meet British welfare standards or demonstrably equivalent regulations
- Extend existing slaughter standards (already applied to imports) to cover production methods
- Ban sale of products from battery cages and sow stalls

2. Strengthen Labelling and Transparency

- Require clear and mandatory labelling of production methods of domestic and imported products (e.g., “produced using sow stalls”, or “non-free-range”).
- Promote transparency in food sourcing, so consumers can make informed choices and support higher-welfare, local products.

2. Enforce Equivalent Standards in Trade Deals

- Mandate minimum production standards (on animal welfare, environmental protection, pesticide use, etc.) for all imported food granted preferential access under the trade agreement.
- Ensure new trade deals include safeguard clauses to protect sensitive sectors (e.g., beef, lamb, eggs).

4. Use Public Procurement to Buy British

- Require UK schools, hospitals, and public bodies to prioritise domestically produced, higher-standard food such as free-range eggs.
- Secure long-term demand and pricing stability for British farmers.

5. Invest in UK Farm Resilience

- Support farmers with grants, innovation funding, and supply chain improvements to stay competitive.
- Back diversification, local processing, and exports of premium UK produce.

6. Empower the **Trade & Agriculture Commission**

- Enable statutory authority and include wider expert voices on welfare.

Contact TAWC at marisa@tawcuk.org if you would like to discuss this briefing or any issues relating to trade and animal welfare.