

Food Standard Controversies Looms Large in Potential U.S.-UK Trade Deal

Jennifer E. McCadney

August 15, 2017

With Brexit on the horizon, UK representatives are reinvigorating relationships with key trading partners on every continent. On 24 July, UK International Trade Secretary Liam Fox and U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross launched a Trade and Investment Working Group to lay the groundwork for a trade deal to be negotiated after the UK exits the EU. Fox reportedly arrived in Washington with a list of “confidence building” measures outside the EU’s purview that could be undertaken without violating the prohibition on negotiations with third countries while still an EU Member State. Initial talks are said to focus on “commercial continuity” and increasing bilateral trade.

Agricultural would almost certainly be included in a comprehensive trade deal, as increased access to UK markets will be among the top U.S. objectives. Key to the success of future negotiations will be agreement on food standards. The EU, and thus the UK (for the time being), has different – and sometimes stricter – rules on food production and consumption than the U.S. and bans imports that do not conform to EU rules. Reportedly, the U.S. wants to create a joint agricultural science committee to decide on standards for goods traded between the UK and the U.S. as part of an agreement.

At the same time confidence-building was taking place in Washington, however, a political row developed back in the UK over the safety of potential food imports from the U.S. under a new trade agreement. Civil society organizations are raising concerns about food safety for UK citizens and the increased difficulty of exporting UK products to the EU if lower standards were to be adopted by the UK. UK producers also are balking at the prospect of competing with products they claim are processed or developed using unsafe methods. Lower standards, they argue, will lead to lower prices and increased competition, both at the expense of UK consumer safety. While so-called “chlorinated chicken” and hormone-treated beef are the headline-grabbing issues, different U.S. and EU rules on a range of issues including animal transport, minimum space requirements for farm livestock, food labeling, genetically modified foods, and the use of pesticides are likely to challenge negotiators on both sides of the Atlantic. Others see an opportunity for the UK to align its standards with science-based – as opposed to precautionary – principles, in the hopes of avoiding the problems that were faced during negotiations on standards in the now sidelined U.S.-EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership talks.

Trade Secretary Fox dismissed the outcry on chicken and beef as an obsession of the media and a mere detail in what would be lengthy potential trade negotiations. On the other hand, UK Environment Secretary Michael Gove responded that the UK would not enter into a trade agreement with the U.S. if it means lowering the UK’s environmental standards. As with many Brexit-related

issues, how far the UK can and will go in a prospective free trade deal with the U.S. and other potential trading partners could depend on the nature of the future UK-EU relationship. Despite clear EU resistance, the UK will attempt to force a discussion of components of that future relationship as early as the end of August when Brexit negotiations resume in Brussels.