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Joint Government-industry task force on future food border checks

The UK food industry is a vital core of our national infrastructure, contributing more to the economy than the automotive and aerospace sectors combined. Across the UK's agri-food and drink supply chain, we employ nearly 4 million people and now export more than £20bn of food and drink each year. We also help to ensure that our consumers continue to enjoy great quality, choice and value.

We welcome your commitment to ensuring continued frictionless trade in goods after the UK leaves the EU. It is essential that our future trade arrangements with the EU mean that the import and export of our sector's products can continue without costly and disruptive border checks, processes and procedures. We are keen to work with Government to ensure this is the case so that our industry is able to take advantage of anticipated new trade opportunities post-Brexit.

It is clear that this poses unique challenges for the whole of the food industry. Many of our products, such as fresh meat, fish, fruit and vegetables, are inherently perishable or have a limited shelf life. Moreover, most foods crossing the EU's external borders are subject to a range of sanitary and/or veterinary certification and inspection requirements which necessitate physical checks at point of entry. These simply cannot be resolved through the use of technology.

At present, most of these mandatory physical checks do not apply to movements of products between the UK and the rest of the EU. But without explicit allowance for this to continue, there will be a high risk of future trade between the UK and the rest of the EU being treated on a par with existing third country requirements. This would add hugely to logistical challenges and costs, as well as potentially increasing food waste if delay leads to spoilage of goods in transit. These adverse effects would be felt across the entire food chain by farmers, manufacturers, traders and consumers.

Delays at border would also impact on exports to EU customers that currently total more than £12bn each year. We know from experience that European retailers will not tolerate delayed deliveries, so ensuring the continued frictionless movement of goods into the EU will be vital if we are to continue expanding our sales into the valuable EU market.

Half of all shipments of poultry meat, a fifth of all beef, lamb and pork, up to half of all fish and seafood and nearly two thirds of all fresh produce would require physical checks and inspections.

Further details of these checks are set out in the annex to this letter. In practical terms, cartons would have to be opened and samples sent for laboratory testing. Any delays in the delivery of our sector's products would impact on already limited shelf lives with implications for prices, for food waste and even for the year-round availability of products that UK consumers expect.

On a practical level, hygienic facilities would be needed at ports and borders. Careful consideration would need to be given about building and staffing suitable facilities to ensure the UK has the necessary capacity and that they are suitably located at key points of entry for food products that are traded between the UK and the EU, including on the Irish land border.

This is of particular importance in the case of trade with the Republic of Ireland. Nearly a fifth of UK food and drink exports go to Ireland, with more than a third of Ireland's reaching UK shores. A quarter of all Northern Irish milk is processed in the South. More than half of Irish beef and cheese goes to the UK. The UK supplies 80 per cent of the flour used in the Republic.

It is of paramount importance that Government finds a solution that helps to address these challenges as part of an ambitious trade deal with the EU. Failure to do so will have significant implications for the food industry in particular and for cross-border trade in general.

We are keen to support Government's efforts to address these specific issues, to help find the best possible solutions that will allow the frictionless trade in our products to continue. We call on Government to work in partnership with our industry by setting up a joint task force to address the challenges posed by sanitary inspection checks on food at the border.

We hope that this would help to provide constructive solutions to deliver Government's aim of ensuring continued frictionless trade and we remain at your disposal to discuss the issues raised in more detail.

Co-signed by chief executives of the following organisations:

Agricultural Industries Confederation
Association of Labour Providers
British Frozen Food Federation
British Hospitality Association
British Meat Processors Association
British Poultry Council
Food and Drink Exporters Association
Food and Drink Federation
Fresh Produce Consortium
International Meat Trade Association
Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association
Packaging Federation
Pet Food Manufacturers Association
Provision Trade Federation
Seasoning and Spice Association
United Kingdom Tea & Infusions Association

George Eustice MP, Minister of State, Defra
Mark Garnier MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, DIT
Margot James MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, BEIS
Jane Ellison MP, Financial Secretary, HM Treasury

Annex

Most food products crossing the EU's external borders are subject to a range of sanitary and/or veterinary certification and inspection requirements which necessitate physical checks at point of entry. The table below looks at just a few of our industry's sectors and the costly and disruptive border checks and inspection that would be required in the event that industry faces the EU's standard third country requirements post-Brexit.

Product	Official that undertakes inspection	Frequency of checks		
		Documentary Checks	ID Checks	Physical Checks
Beef, Lamb, Pork	Official veterinarian	100%	100%	20%*
Poultry meat	Official veterinarian	100%	100%	50%*
Fish	EHO	100%	100%	20%**
Fresh Produce	PHSI/RPA/PHA	100%	100%	62%*
Pet food	Official veterinarian	100%	100%	<10%

* Physical checks involve opening cartons and can also involve samples being taken and sent to the laboratory

** 20% of consignments of fish products in hermetically sealed containers intended to render them stable at ambient temperatures, fresh and frozen fish and dry and/or salted fishery products;

50% of consignments of fishery products other than those mentioned above; and

50% of consignments of bivalve molluscs.

There are reduced checks for seafood from Canada and New Zealand because of equivalence agreements. The legislation is Decision 94/360 as amended.