

Rt. Hon. Liz Truss MP
Secretary of State for International Trade
Department of International Trade
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RE: Food, farming and fishing standards in international trade

Dear Secretary of State Liz Truss,

Congratulations on your new role as Secretary of State for International Trade. I write as the chief executive of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming. We represent around 100 national public interest organisations and work with many more at local level.

As a former Defra Secretary of State, you will know that agri-food contributes £113bn to the UK economy and that 3.9m people are employed in food and farming (13% of employment); you will no doubt be keen to consider how your policies will impact on this important part of domestic industry.

Sustain recognises new trade deals could bring many economic benefits; also stimulating a race to the top in food, farming and environmental standards. Our alliance members have told us they want a trade policy that puts safety, public health, animal welfare, environmental protection, and low antibiotic use centre stage. We also want to be sure that farmers at home and abroad can make a decent living, and farm in a way that supports efforts to tackle climate change and restore nature. We have several interests in your Department's policy making that we would like you to prioritise.

1. Ensuring 'no deal' Brexit does not disrupt food supplies, British farmers and standards

Sustain's work with our alliance since the EU Referendum in 2016 clearly demonstrates that the Brexit process will have a huge impact on our food, farming and fishing systems. While the opportunity to strike new trade deals across the world is exciting, leaving the EU without a deal could interrupt trade routes worth billions of pounds (UK exports to the EU were [£274bn in 2017](#)).

One third of our food currently comes from Europe and £13bn of food exports goes the other way; disruption in either direction could have a devastating effect. Over [8 million of our fellow citizens](#) in the UK already live in food insecurity and don't have the means to stockpile or cope with even a short-term disruption in food supply, nor to afford higher prices associated with scarcity or fluctuations in the value of currency. We are advocating with the Department for Work and Pensions a 'hardship fund' to help those who may be pushed into food crisis by a no deal Brexit.

2. Guaranteeing food safety, quality and high production standards

The British public expects their food to be safe. New trade deals must not expose us to increased risk of food poisoning from pathogens like salmonella, campylobacter and E.coli 0157. We would like more information on how the government and the Food Standards Agency intend to ensure the food we receive via new trade deals is safe.

Sustain's members have expressed alarm at suggestions that the UK might [suspend or diminish our food regulations and farming standards](#) and initiation of trade discussions with countries such as the United States have also caused concerns, with pressure to [lower food production standards](#) such as the

introduction of chlorine-dipped chicken, hormone-treated beef or any meat produced using antibiotics that are critical to human health to our food supply. Given there are no regulations about food labelling in places like hospitals, schools or restaurants, UK consumers will not know that they are eating products that do not meet British food standards, and will not be able to exercise choice.

Recent [government research](#) shows that over three-quarters of the British public want to support British farmers. Moreover, polling data from [IPPR](#) shows 82% of British consumers favour retaining high food standards over a US trade deal in a Brexit trade-off scenario. This is supported by information from consumer organisation and Sustain member Which? as well as in the [responses](#) to your own Department's recent consultation on a future US/UK trade deal.

However, farmers' livelihoods will be put [at risk](#) if they have to compete against cheap food imports produced to lower environmental, animal welfare, food safety and employment standards. Those [farming unions](#) fear a 'no deal' Brexit, as do [leading food manufacturers](#) and [workers' unions](#).

3. Ensuring transparency and meeting international agreements

The Sustain alliance is clear: trade deals must deliver on national priorities for food, health, climate change and restoration of nature, and be open to public debate, scientific review and parliamentary scrutiny and consent, including the devolved administrations. Trade deals must also deliver on achieving objectives to which the UK has signed up, such as the Paris Climate Change Agreement, International Labour Organisation conventions and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

4. Being cautious of arguments for 'cheap food'

During Brexit debates we have noticed a number of commentators saying that new trade deals will benefit the UK because we will have cheaper food. Sustain is clear; [cheap food is not necessarily good food](#). We argue for 'affordable' food, rather than cheap food. Cheap, poor quality, imported food will come at a cost – to the farmer or food producer, to animal welfare, to the environment or jobs in UK food and farming. There may be hidden costs to our NHS and economy from food poisoning and lost days at work. Whilst foodbank use is rising in the UK, food bank organisers have confirmed that the primary reason is low or uncertain income and delays or changes to benefits payments. These problems will not be solved simply by cheaper food.

In high income countries like the UK it is those on low incomes who lose out with poor health. The cheapest foods tend to be long shelf-life snacks and processed foods with higher fat, salt and sugar, and lower levels of fresh and healthy ingredients. Calorie for calorie, processed foods high in fat and sugar are 2.5 times cheaper than veg. This contributes to disease and will increase costs for the NHS, which is already struggling to cope with increased rates of obesity and diabetes.

5. Resisting Investor-State Dispute Settlements (ISDS)

Sustain and our alliance members are very concerned about the potential for future trade deals to generate costly Investor-State Dispute Settlements. We would like to see them [excluded](#) from any deal as they are the mechanism that could be used to undermine UK farmers, fishers and food producers and to challenge public health, environmental and food standard protections.

Thank you for considering this letter and the issues important to the Sustain alliance membership.

Yours sincerely,



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