

PRESS RELEASE

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**Shoppers could be left in the dark about**

**hazardous hormone-treated beef if weakened UK**

**makes food trade deal concessions**

*New report identifies another risk from bartering away food standards as part of trade deals*

As the UK prepares to leave the EU, there are signs that some government ministers would be willing to sacrifice food standards to win trade agreements with non-EU states such as the USA.

A new report by food policy experts shows that if the UK’s food standards were weakened in exchange, for example, for lower tariffs on steel, one effect will be that beef from cattle given growth-boosting hormones could enter the UK food supply. If the standards were lowered, the meat will not be labelled to say how it had been produced. Meanwhile, hormone-produced beef would remain unlawful in the EU, on sound scientific grounds. It might even provoke a boycott of beef in and from the UK.

The report co-authored by professors at the University of Sussex and City, University of London warns that legalising hormone-reared beef would introduce an unnecessary and unacceptable risk to public health.

*Hormone-treated beef: Should Britain accept it after Brexit?* by Profs Erik Millstone and Tim Lang s published today by the Food Research Collaboration. The authors call on ministers to ensure that food safety standards in the UK will never be weakened, especially not as a bargaining chip in trade talks. The authors also urge UK farmers, supermarkets and butchers to make explicit commitments to consumers never to produce or sell hormone-treated beef.
Erik Millstone, professor of science policy at the University of Sussex, said: “The idea that, once the UK leaves the EU, it will become a rule-maker, not a rule-taker, is illusory. Exporting to other countries requires accepting their standards. The choice is: Which rules to take - the EU’s, the USA’s or the World Trade Organisation’s? If UK products don’t match their standards, they won’t buy them. Trade requires shared rules and minimum standards. Food standards in the EU are far higher than those in the USA, and US standards are far higher than WTO standards. The UK should at least stick to EU; the only changes allowed should be to make food safer, never less safe.”

Hormone use is permitted in cattle rearing by US, Canadian, Mexican and Australian authorities but beef from hormone-treated cattle has been banned in the EU since the mid-1980s.

Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City, University of London, said: “The UK Government should ensure either that food standards remain fully aligned with EU standards, or that we adopt higher standards. There is a triple risk here: to health, to British beef farmers’ livelihoods, and to the UK’s ability to determine its own food safety standards. Hormone use is a test case for whether the UK seeks a more sustainable food supply. Hormone use would be a stupid step towards intensive beef feeding lots.”

The report warns that Public Health England, the Food Standards Agency and Environment Agency, whose role is to protect standards, will require a significant increase in funding to cope, something which no minister has committed to so far. A weakened state infrastructure is about to negotiate with much more powerful trading forces.

The authors make the following recommendations:

* The UK Government should ensure either that food standards remain fully aligned with EU standards, or that higher standards are adopted.
* Food standards should not be sacrificed to facilitate trade in undesirable and/or unsafe products.
* The Government should explicitly acknowledge that any weakening of UK food standards, such as permitting the sale of hormone-reared beef, will result in barriers to UK food companies wishing to export their products to the EU’s Single Market.
* The UK consumer movement should strongly resist moves to weaken current levels of consumer protection as part of future trade deals.
* UK food and farming industries should publicly commit themselves to producing and selling only beef from cattle never treated with synthetic hormones.

**Notes to editors**

To arrange interviews with Professor Erik Millstone or Professor Tim Lang, please contact Neil Vowles at the University of Sussex communications team on 01273 873712.

The briefing paper *Hormone-treated beef: Should Britain accept it after Brexit*? is available at: <http://foodresearch.org.uk/publications/hormone-treated-beef-should-britain-accept-it-after-brexit/>

It was published on the Food Research Collaboration website at 00.01AM (GMT) on Friday 7 September 2018.

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**The Food Research Collaboration** is a UK initiative bringing together academics and civil society organisations to improve the production, sharing and use of evidence-based knowledge to underpin food policy that supports health, equity and sustainability. It is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and based at the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London.

All mammals have natural hormones circulating in their bodies, but in the USA almost all beef cattle receive hormone supplements as fat-soluble pellets implanted under the skin.

The six hormones administered to beef cattle in the USA (but prohibited in the EU) are 17β-oestradiol, progesterone, testosterone, zeranol, trenbolone acetate and melengestrol acetate.

Supplementary synthetic hormones are used in high-intensity beef production systems, where treated cattle gain weight faster for a given amount of food, so reach their slaughter weight at slightly lower cost.

The use of synthetic hormones occurs most frequently in the USA in so-called ‘feedlot systems’, where cattle are confined in large sheds or crowded outdoor ‘lots’ for around six months during which they are rapidly fattened on grain-based diets to slaughter weight.

Key animal welfare problems associated with feedlots include muddy conditions, poor cattle handling and heat stress. Grain-based diets can lead to serious digestive and other health problems for cattle.