

FRC Food Brexit Briefing

Chlorinated chicken:
Is the UK being
softened up to accept
lower food standards?

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Introduction

On 29 August 2019, in an interview with Sky News, Professor Sir Ian Boyd, retiring Chief Scientific Adviser at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), commented on the question of whether imports of chlorinated chicken and beef reared with artificial hormones should be allowed into the UK. He said that these were matters that should be decided by ‘consumer choice’.¹ This briefing explains why the issues he raised are highly contested and sensitive; why we would be concerned if the UK allowed these products in under new post-Brexit trade deals; and why Defra and other bodies such as the Food Standards Agency (FSA), which are supposed to protect consumers, should not duck the issues by saying this can be left to ‘consumer choice’. Whether chlorinated chicken and hormone-fed beef are allowed into the UK are important tests for whether Defra and the FSA stand up for UK consumers.

The arguments

1. Choice matters but it is about to be reduced

The whole point about consumer choice is that consumers can only choose what they actually want if they are adequately informed about the available options. US chickens are not labelled as washed in chlorine, nor is US beef labelled as hormone-injected to speed the animals’ growth. The Trump administration and the US food industry hope that after Brexit they can get the UK not just to accept all and any US food products, but also to adopt USA food labelling rules and standards from farm to fork. We hope Professor Boyd’s opinions are not early signs that Defra, and the government more generally, wants to soften up UK consumers to accept US meat-rearing practices and products.

2. The science matters

It is odd, too, that the Defra chief scientific adviser has chosen to pronounce on subjects that are not his department’s responsibility. It is the Food Standards Agency that should provide independent expert advice on food safety in the UK. Senior FSA officials have indicated informally that they think that neither US chlorinated chicken nor hormones-produced beef are acceptably safe.² We hope this is not a sign that the FSA’s independence is being undermined. UK consumers need to be aware that if there is a no-deal Brexit, the UK will sever links with the EU-wide food safety systems and scientific advice through the European Food Safety Authority, and will have to rely increasingly on an under-resourced Food Standards Agency.

3. Consumer safety

Professor Boyd is on thin ice in saying that chlorinated chicken is acceptably safe. In part, what is at stake is a difference of safety cultures between the EU and the USA. After decades of food safety scandals, the European Union adopted an approach that tries to be preventative and precautionary rather than remedial. It aims to ensure that foods are produced in sufficiently hygienic ways to avoid the need to be disinfected prior to sale. In the USA, far dirtier production systems are tolerated and, before being put on sale, foods can be washed not just in chlorinated water but also with five other chemical disinfectants (acidified sodium chlorite, peroxyacetic acid, cetylpyridium chloride, lactic acid, and trisodium phosphate).³ Furthermore, the US food industry does not just use chemical disinfectant on chickens, but on other meats, as well as on fish, vegetables, salads and fruits.⁴ By putting such issues to consumer ‘choice’, Professor Boyd must surely be assuming British consumers will henceforth be told all this, and be prepared to accept it.

In 2008, an expert panel convened by the World Health Organisation and UN Food and Agriculture Organisation concluded in its 289-page report that not enough information was available that

would allow them accurately to identify and compare risks from, and benefits of, chemical disinfectants. Since then, the evidence in favour of using chemical disinfectants has weakened rather than strengthened.

Recently, strong evidence emerged indicating that chlorine washing is not an effective disinfectant. Professor Keevil and colleagues at Southampton University published an important paper in spring 2018 showing, with leaf vegetables, that chlorine washing does not eliminate the bacteria that cause food poisoning. Chlorine washing, they found, merely blocks the standard test method by which the presence of such bacteria should be revealed.⁵ So the bacteria remain present on the food, and able to cause serious types of food poisoning. This outcome can be not just very unpleasant but even fatal.

The available evidence, which senior officials in the Food Standards Agency acknowledge,⁶ suggests that rates of bacterial food poisoning in the USA are far higher than those in the UK or EU, and indeed may be 10 times as high.⁷ So US foods are often far less clean and far less safe than their current UK counterparts, even before they might get transported across the Atlantic after a future UK-US food trade deal.

Professor Boyd is also mistaken in asserting that US hormones-produced beef is perfectly safe. When the US authorities considered the safety of hormone-promoted beef, they only asked if such beef would be safe for average healthy adults, and then decided it would be safe for them – but we are not all average healthy adults. In the EU, the Scientific Committee on Veterinary Measures Relating to Public Health (SCVMPH) assessed possible risks, not only to average healthy adults, but also to groups including pregnant women, pre-pubescent children and those who are immunologically compromised. In 1999 the SCVMPH reported that given what it knew about the properties of the hormones, and considering the available scientific evidence, no safe threshold levels could be set for any of the six synthetic hormones used in the USA. Moreover, for one of

the hormones, the SCVMPH said: “In the case of 17β oestradiol there is a substantial body of recent evidence suggesting that it has to be considered as a complete carcinogen, as it exerts both tumour initiating and tumour promoting effects. The data available does not allow a quantitative estimate of the risk.”⁸ In the meantime, no contrary evidence has emerged.

4. Animal Welfare

Livestock in the USA are kept in far less hygienic conditions than those accepted in the UK and EU.⁹ The response in the USA had been to administer large quantities of antibiotic drugs to their livestock to try to treat or even prevent dangerous infections. In the period 2009-2017, the sales of antibiotics to US livestock farmers rose by 27%, while they declined by 28% in the UK.¹⁰ In January 2017 the US Food and Drug Administration banned the use of antibiotics as growth promoters, but continued to permit their use to treat infections, and also to prevent infections though only under veterinary supervision.¹¹ The overuse of antibiotics, especially in livestock farming, is contributing to the emergence of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria; and so the use of those veterinary medicines should be cut, not increased.

5. Worker health and safety

The use of chemical disinfectants in US food production is also an unnecessary and undesirable risk to the health of the people who work in the abattoirs and meat-cutting plants where chemical disinfectant sprays and washes are used. The USA-based organisation Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine reported in 2013 that poultry industry employees and government inspectors working for the US Department of Agriculture “have...suffered from asthma, burns, rashes, irritated eyes, and sinus problems that they attribute to [disinfectant] chemical exposure” and that “chlorine and peracetic acid are used to treat chicken at the processing plant where a federal poultry inspector died after coughing up blood and his lungs and kidneys failed.”¹²

6. The political sensitivity

Professor Boyd's statement could be interpreted as an early warning that the Westminster government might be about to try to soften up the British public to accept chemically washed food imports from the USA. The Government is certainly very keen to have a 'trophy' trade deal post-Brexit to show to the British public as long-sought benefits. Food standards are already highly sensitive within early discussions with the USA.

US authorities and the Trump administration have made it clear that they will insist the UK accepts US standards as a condition for a post-Brexit UK-USA trade deal.¹³ US food safety and animal welfare standards are significantly weaker than those in the UK and EU, not just in relation to the use of chemical disinfectants, beef hormones and antibiotics, but also in relation for example to pesticides and food additives, as well as labelling. If the UK government allows the import of chlorine-washed chicken and hormones-produced beef, as implied by Professor Boyd's remarks, will it be long before the government approves their widespread use in the UK? If those US products can be lawfully imported into the UK, British farmers will demand the right to use the same methods, so that they can compete against lower-cost US producers. If so, at a stroke, UK food safety and animal welfare standards would be lowered, despite the clear preferences of the UK public and the food industry. Weakening UK food standards would also mean breaking repeated promises (though never in writing) from Dr Liam Fox¹⁴, Michael Gove¹⁵ and Boris Johnson¹⁶.

Conclusions

For all those reasons, we maintain that Professor Boyd's assurances about the safety and acceptability of US chlorine-washed foods and hormones-produced beef should not be relied upon. Opening up British markets to US-produced meats and vegetables is far more than a minor concern about animal welfare; it implies significant risks to public health and a radical decline in food quality standards which would be unprecedented and unacceptable in the UK. This must be prevented by robust commitments, to be included in all legal agreements in any post-Brexit trade-related negotiations.¹⁷

Recommendations

We call upon

1. The Government and all parliamentary parties to re-affirm their commitments to ensuring that UK food standards on safety and welfare will not be weakened or undermined by post-Brexit trade deals.
2. Public health, consumer and environment organisations to combine efforts to prevent the undermining of high food standards in the UK.
3. All UK food industries to prevent the creation of a two-tier food market of high standards for UK production alongside weaker international standards allowed for imports, with these likely to be marketed to people on low incomes.

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