

## Briefing: Core standards explained

28 September 2022

### What are core standards?

Core standards refer to regulations covering a host of environmental issues, from carbon emissions to animal welfare, which apply to products either produced in the UK or imported. There are many models of core standards already in practice both in the UK and abroad, such as UK Forest Risk Commodity (FRC) protections and the US Marine Mammals Protection Act (MMPA).

How they work in practice is quite simple: they ensure comparable standards are applied to both imports and domestic products to level the playing field and ensure a minimum environmental standard.<sup>1</sup> For example, the FRC protections, legislated in the Environment Act, make it illegal for businesses to import products such as coffee and palm oil if they are found to be linked to illegal deforestation or other damaging impacts to forest ecosystems. The MMPA requires fisheries that want to export to the US to meet standards of marine mammal protection that are “comparable in effectiveness” to US standards.<sup>2</sup>

### Why do we need core standards?

In many areas, the UK already has high domestic standards to protect public health, consumers, and the environment, which while not always successfully implemented do set requirements on UK-produced food. Imported goods, on the other hand, are not subject to comparable standards. Considering the UK imports 48%<sup>3</sup> of the food it consumes (81% of seafood by volume<sup>4</sup>), the influence of international products on the domestic market cannot be underestimated.

Establishing core standards would ensure that imports are not undermining domestic standards, protect UK producers who are required to adhere to higher standards, and alleviate the pressure lower quality imports create for a relaxation of domestic standards.

Core standards would not change or re-design existing UK environmental regulation but would seek to expand the scope of existing standards or apply comparable standards to relevant imports. Retailers are already adopting their own voluntary standards, such as Red Tractor. To minimise the regulatory and cost burden on producers, these voluntary standards could serve as benchmarks for designing core standards.

### Why are core standards so important for food and farming?

At present, the only standards that apply to all food sold in the UK, regardless of origin, are food safety standards. However, food safety standards are not the same as core standards. Food safety standards protect humans, animals and plants from harm to health. Yet the lack of core environmental standards for food imports means products produced with methods which are illegal in the UK are still allowed into the country. It

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<sup>1</sup> WWF, [Core Environmental Standards](#), February 2022

<sup>2</sup> NOAA, [Marine Mammal Protection Act](#), August 2022

<sup>3</sup> [National Food Strategy](#), July 2021

<sup>4</sup> WWF, [Risky Seafood Business](#), 2022

should not be acceptable to allow products to be imported that damage the environment elsewhere when these products would not be legal to produce domestically.

The government has repeatedly promised not to compromise the UK's high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards in trade deals. **However, little detail has been provided about how this commitment will be upheld in practice where no import standards currently exist.** Recently completed trade deals, such as with Australia, will in fact undermine the UK's existing standards in several key areas, such as on animal welfare and the environment, and subject UK farmers to unfair competition from food products produced using harmful pesticides which are banned in the UK.<sup>5</sup>

It is therefore essential that the UK adopts a broader suite of core environmental and animal welfare standards to prevent the offshoring of our environmental footprint and ensure a level playing field for domestic producers. Indeed, 91% of the public believe that food safety standards should be the same between domestic and imported food, and 84% believe the same for environmental protections.<sup>6</sup> Core standards will strengthen public confidence in the sustainability and quality of the products they buy and support the capacity of UK industries to continue improving on existing practices, such as farming methods that improve soils and reduce emissions, without fear of being undercut.

## The facts about core standards

Despite the popularity and clear benefits of core standards, there are still some misconceptions about what qualifies and whether core standards are viable under existing international frameworks. This section seeks to establish some facts around core standards.

### 1. There are no binding international environmental or animal welfare standards for trade

Food safety and animal health standards are often conflated with animal welfare standards, but they are not the same and have differing levels of internationally recognised protections. Animal health is simply the absence of disease, whereas animal welfare refers to how they are treated.

There are internationally recognised food safety standards which cover animal health.<sup>7</sup> However, there are currently no internationally recognised environmental or animal welfare standards which apply to imports. The only international animal welfare standards that have been developed, by the World Organisation on Animal Health (WOAH), are not recognised by the WTO and are therefore not applicable to imported products.

The same is true for environmental standards. While there have been proposals to develop internationally recognised environmental standards that apply to trade<sup>8</sup>, at present there is no agreed international mechanism for this.

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<sup>5</sup> NFU, [‘Missed opportunity’ to reach world-class deal with Australia](#), April 2022; WWF, Sustain, Which?, Greener UK, RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming, Safeguarding the UK's food and farming standards in trade: Lessons from the Australia-UK free trade agreement, March 2022

<sup>6</sup> Which?, [Consumer Priorities and Trade Deals](#), December 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Codex Alimentarius, [International Food Standards](#)

<sup>8</sup> WWF, [Codex Planetarius, Maintaining the Environmental Sustainability of Food Production](#), 2016

It is worth noting that international standards often take years to develop. Thankfully, there is nothing blocking the government from implementing core standards at the national level, which in addition to levelling the playing field would show international leadership and help advance the conversation on developing internationally recognised standards.

## **2. Simply because domestic standards are not modified by a trade deal does not mean they aren't undermined**

It has been suggested that we needn't worry about domestic standards if a trade agreement does not require altering national level legislation. The UK-Australia FTA does not require changes to existing animal welfare legislation, for example. However, this is simply because hardly any UK animal welfare legislation contains international trade provisions. Therefore, no changes are needed to fully implement the trade agreement.

This does not mean, however, that standards will not be undermined by trade agreements. As the TAC itself noted for the UK-Australia deal regarding Australia's use of pesticides banned in the UK, **reducing or eliminating tariffs on imports produced to lower standards will likely result in the import of more products that would be illegal to produce domestically**. Domestic producers will face additional pressures to remain cost competitive which will increase pressure for watering down UK standards.

The required scrutiny of trade deals to date has been limited in scope and particularly ineffective on this point. **It is not within scope for the TAC or the government, under their statutory duties, to assess the impact of competitive pressures on UK farming**<sup>9</sup>, let alone the cumulative impacts of multiple trade deals that lower tariffs across a range of industries and products. Brazil and the US are likely to demand similar access as that granted to countries like Australia and that causes significant environmental risk.

## **3. Introducing trade standards on environmental and animal welfare grounds is allowed**

It has been suggested that import restrictions based on environmental or animal welfare standards runs afoul of WTO regulations. This is untrue. It is certainly possible to design core standards that comply with WTO requirements: the UK already has import restrictions environmental and animal welfare grounds, such as the FRC protections.<sup>10</sup>

Core standards can be implemented in compliance with WTO rules by ensuring they are designed to apply equally across trade partners and are flexible enough to adapt to the national context. This means standards should be able to respond to regional or national variations in geography and ecology and provide a level playing field to ensure developing economies are also able to fully participate in international markets. The TAC report on the UK-Australia FTA agrees on this point. It states that import regulations on environmental grounds are very much possible and outlines several potential policy approaches for introducing import regulations in line with WTO rules, such as product labelling schemes.<sup>11</sup>

There are also support mechanisms which exist to ensure core standards can be implemented without unfairly penalising developing countries, such as the Aid for Trade

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<sup>9</sup> As set out in [Agriculture Act 2020](#)

<sup>10</sup> As set out in [Environment Act 2021](#)

<sup>11</sup> Trade and Agriculture Commission: [advice to the Secretary of State for International Trade on the UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement](#), April 2022

initiative and the Forest, Agriculture and Commodity Trade (FACT) Dialogue. These can be further tailored to encourage and support adoption and compliance with core standards.

#### 4. Core standards are widely supported

Core standards are popular with farmers, businesses and the public. Over one million people signed the National Farmers' Union petition to introduce core standards for food imports<sup>12</sup>, and analysis shows over 2.6 million people have signed petitions calling for environmental and animal welfare standards to be strengthened.<sup>13</sup> Recent polling in 'blue wall' constituencies clearly showed voters believe environmental and animal welfare standards should be strengthened, regardless of the impact on our ability to agree new trade deals.<sup>14</sup> Over 80 percent of likely Conservative voters want stronger protections around the use of pesticides and fertilisers.

A group of major UK businesses, including Co-op, Waitrose and Nestlé, have called on the government to launch an initiative to create core standards.<sup>15</sup> Three separate sets of independent expert advisers – the National Food Strategy, Climate Change Committee and the first Trade and Agriculture Commission (TAC) – have all recommended that the government produce a set of core standards.<sup>16,17,18</sup> The International Trade Committee has further recommended that liberalising agri-food trade 'should be conditional on imports meeting core UK food production standards'.<sup>19</sup> The EFRA Committee has also added its voice to the growing chorus of support for core standards<sup>20</sup>, and Professor Lorand Bartels, Chair of the TAC, has made clear that there is nothing to stop the government from implementing core standards.

### Conclusion

The UK should adopt a sensible approach to trade policy based on high quality and sustainable production methods. **The government should develop a set of legally binding core standards that cover climate change, the environment and animal welfare.** These would set minimum sustainability thresholds for all products imported as well as those produced domestically. Not only would this provide a level playing field for UK producers, but it would also give the public confidence in the quality and sustainability of the products they buy and help ensure our environmental footprint is not exported overseas.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> National Farmers' Union, [NFU food standards petition hits one million signatures](#), June 2020

<sup>13</sup> Future British Standards Coalition, [Safeguarding Standards](#), November 2020

<sup>14</sup> Unchecked UK, [A view from the Blue Wall](#), May 2022

<sup>15</sup> [Business Statement of Support for the Development of UK Core Environmental Standards](#)

<sup>16</sup> National Food Strategy, [An independent review for government](#), July 2021

<sup>17</sup> Climate Change Committee, [Progress in reducing emissions 2022 Report to Parliament](#), June 2022

<sup>18</sup> Greener UK, [Briefing on the Trade and Agriculture Commission's final recommendations report](#), May 2021

<sup>19</sup> International Trade Committee, [UK trade negotiations: Agreement with Australia](#), July 2022

<sup>20</sup> Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Australia FTA: Food and Agriculture](#), June 2022

<sup>21</sup> [WWF briefing on the UK's role in building environmental standards for trade and agriculture](#), March 2021. For options for design of core standards, see [think piece by IEEP and TULIP](#), forming part of research project commissioned by WWF.

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