

UK-EU reset – implications for animal welfare*

Author: Prof Rick D'Eath†

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Overview

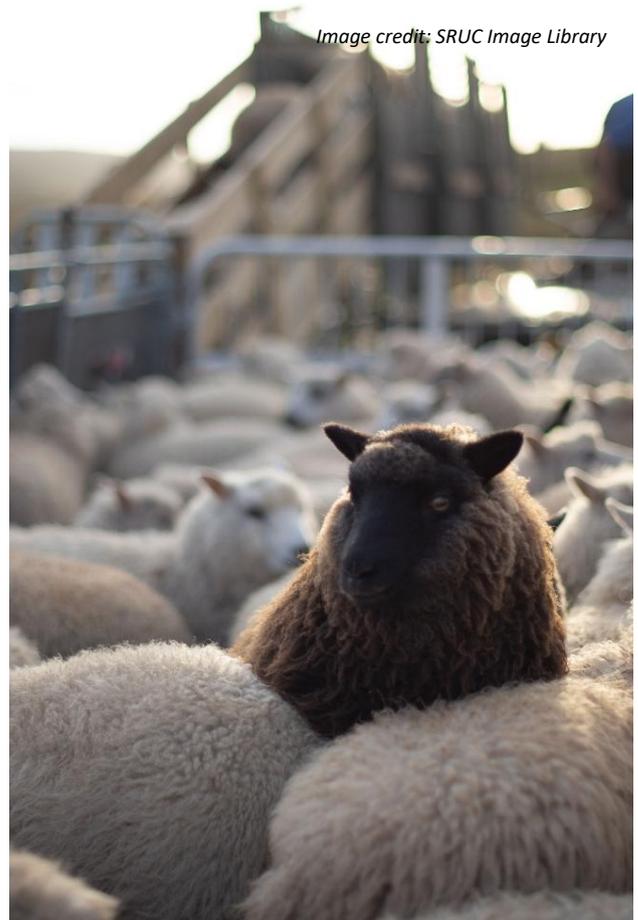
The Brexit 'Trade and Co-operation Agreement' of 2020 increased trade friction, red tape and costs for trade in animals and animal products between UK and EU. The 'reset' announced in May 2025 included immediate agreements on energy and fishing, and identified further areas to negotiate, including an Animal and Plant Health or 'Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary Agreement' (SPS). Issues for the ongoing negotiations include the extent of the 'short list' of exceptions in UK alignment with EU rules (and 'dynamic alignment' with future rules) and the fee the UK must pay. Animal welfare could be impacted by a SPS and by alignment with/ exceptions to EU rules.

Main Findings

Negotiations are ongoing (with ambition for a mid-2027 implementation of the SPS). This literature review and policy analysis highlight some of the animal welfare issues at stake.

- Sanitary and Phytosanitary deal
 - Cuts red tape, boosting trade and profitability for UK food businesses (especially in Northern Ireland).
 - This could enable good animal welfare, or expand 'minimum standards' intensive production.
 - Movement of zoo and companion animals may be easier.
 - Enforcement agencies will need to ensure that more open borders do not increase exotic disease risk from the continent including African Swine Fever.
- Convergence with EU rules (and dynamic alignment) and enforcement by European Court of Justice.
 - Improvements in animal welfare in areas where the UK has slipped back compared to EU rules: 1) Handling chickens by the legs, 2) Permitted Pesticides and Herbicides
 - Detriments to welfare where the UK was considering moving ahead of EU: 1) Method of production labelling, 2) Ban on Foie Gras imports, 3) Gene editing that could improve livestock health and welfare.
 - UK becomes a 'rule taker' rather setting new policy like an EU member.

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† Animal Behaviour & Welfare Team, Animal & Veterinary Sciences, SRUC. T: 07973 776850, E: rick.death@sruc.ac.uk

Introduction – UK- EU relations since Brexit, and the May 2025 ‘reset’

After EU exit, UK-EU trade was governed by Johnson’s ‘hard Brexit’ Trade and Cooperation Agreement (2020)¹. In 2023 Sunak’s Windsor Framework reduced some of the trade friction between Britain and Northern Ireland it had caused². In May of 2025 a ‘reset’ deal was announced³. It involved statements on security and defence, immediate agreements on fishing and energy and a ‘common understanding’ laying out areas to be developed in further discussions. This includes a deal on sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS; animal and plant health), which is discussed here as it is the most relevant for animal welfare.

In August 2025, the UK government suspended the introduction of extra border checks on live animal imports from the EU, and on specific animal and plant goods from Ireland ahead of the expected SPS deal⁴. SPS negotiations began in October, with ambition for implementation within 12-18 months without a transition period⁵

An SPS deal would boost the trade in animal products

Agri-food exports have dropped by 21% and imports by 7% since EU exit impacting SMEs in particular and raising food prices. Thinktank ‘UK in a changing Europe’ analysis suggested that an SPS deal would reverse this loss in trade, predicting 22.5% export and 5.6% import increases, adding 0.22% to the agricultural sectors value added⁶.

Through the UK agreeing to apply EU animal health standards in an SPS deal, trade would be increased by removing regulations and red tape including⁷:

- Time-consuming 100% documentary and 30% physical checks on animal products
- Export health certificates which are £200 per shipment, regardless of size, punishing small exporters
- A current ban of UK exports to the EU of processed meat (fresh sausages, burgers) and some shellfish.

SPS deal implications for animal welfare

The table on the next page summarises some of the benefits and risks for animal welfare of an SPS deal. Live animal exports to the continent are already banned⁸, but trade between Britain and Northern Ireland could increase with a deal eliminating the need for the remaining Windsor Framework regulations, potentially increasing animal transport. The animal welfare impact of increased UK export trade is difficult to predict. Where products from higher welfare animals displace those produced from animals with lower welfare, overall welfare would benefit. This would occur where UK standards (and actual welfare) are higher than EU standards (and actual welfare) but not when vice-versa.

Defra’s Animal Welfare Strategy for England (December 2025) refers to the SPS negotiations “The UK and EU share high animal welfare standards and a desire to go further in many key areas. The details of the Agreement are subject to negotiation, but we have been clear about the importance of being able to set high animal welfare standards.”⁹



¹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9106-2/>

² <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9736/>

³ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10312/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/extra-border-checks-cancelled-ahead-of-uk-eu-deal>

⁵ <https://www.brownejacobson.com/insights/food-for-thought-food-and-drink-regulatory-update-autumn-2025/brexit-reset-uk-eu-sps-agreement-breakthrough>

⁶ <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/would-a-veterinary-agreement-be-a-boost-for-uk-eu-agri-food-exports/>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-businesses-cheer-uk-eu-deal-to-support-food-trade-and-profits>

⁸ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9912>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england>

Table summarising animal welfare benefits and risks of different elements of the EU-UK reset

	What	Welfare benefit?	Welfare risk?
Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) Agreement	Cut red tape (Export Health Certificates etc.) around movement of animals and animal-derived food products (including to and from Northern Ireland)	If it is cheaper and easier to export, trade will increase making UK farmers more profitable. Increased production affects animal welfare depending on the systems used and displaced.	Exotic disease risk from imports—e.g. African Swine Fever Elimination of red tape could mean more live animal movements across the Irish sea.
	Export of processed meat (sausages, burgers) and some shellfish to be permitted.	As above. Assuming high welfare production systems.	Increased animal production in systems with poor welfare.
Dynamic Alignment on regulations with a 'few exceptions'	Where EU and UK rules have diverged, UK may need to re-converge, and to accept new rules as they come (dynamic alignment) ¹⁰	Could raise UK standards as EU raise theirs	Prevents UK from raising standards faster than EU, without negotiating a new exception each time. Or raised UK standards mean loss of market share if EU's are lower.
	Where current or future UK standards are higher than EU standards - will exceptions be allowed ?	If allowed on the short list of exceptions, welfare standards would be maintained ¹¹	Future exceptions might need to be negotiated, slowing progress. If not allowed and UK standards move ahead of EU, imports from EU create unfair competition ¹²
	Current of future UK standards lower than EU standards - will UK come into line ?	If alignment is agreed this could raise UK welfare standards. e.g. Handling chickens by the legs permitted in UK (remains banned in the EU).	If exceptions are agreed, this is bad for animal welfare and sets a negative precedent.
	Chemicals: pesticides, herbicides where UK and EU regulations have diverged	UK standards now lower than EU, so convergence could benefit nature and wild animal welfare ¹³	Reduced economic advantage for UK agriculture, less money to improve welfare.
Other specific issues	Potential to ban foie-gras imports was on Labour's manifesto	An exception could be negotiated to allow this ban to be enacted.	Foie-gras ban might be a casualty in SPS negotiations ¹⁴ , as might a potential import ban on fur.
	Gene editing (GE) permitted in UK, but not EU. Progress on GE may be stopped or slowed.	Depending on the type, GE could be neutral or harmful to welfare.	GE well regulated to ensure animal welfare of GE animals. Missed opportunities e.g. GE for disease resistance.
	Zoos hope for reduced red tape around zoo animal transfers ¹⁵	Easier breeding for conservation, less overcrowding	More animal movements - stressful for those animals
	Return of Pet passports ¹⁶	Fewer vet visits for pets	Increased exotic disease risk. e.g. <i>Brucella canis</i>
	Vaccines for Bovine TB		Banned in the EU, could be a casualty of alignment. ¹⁷

¹⁰ <https://citp.ac.uk/publications/an-eu-uk-sps-agreement-the-perils-and-possibilities-of-realignment>

¹¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-animal-welfare-standards-brexite-reset-deal/>

¹² <https://www.animalpolicyinternational.org/post/animal-welfare-groups-raise-alarm-eu-veterinary-agreement-threatens-uk-standards>

¹³ <https://www.pan-uk.org/huge-win-uk-aligns-with-eu-pesticide-standards/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/13/ministers-stay-silent-on-pledge-to-ban-foie-gras-as-eu-talks-approach>

¹⁵ <https://www.chesterzoo.org/news/were-welcoming-the-uk-eu-efforts-to-cut-red-tape-on-animal-transfers>

¹⁶ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-07-08/66076/>

¹⁷ <https://www.nfuonline.com/news/uk-eu-sps-negotiations/uk-eu-sps-negotiations-animal-health/>

Alignment and dynamic alignment implications for welfare

The reset UK-EU joint statement refers to ‘Dynamic alignment with EU animal welfare rules with a limited short list of exceptions’ with the EU court of justice as the authority over any dispute. The UK has a right to be consulted over rule changes but will not be involved in EU decisions. The NFU is arguing that UK government should be negotiating UK access to the decision-making process (expert committees), albeit without a vote¹⁸.

In the short term, where the UK has fallen behind on welfare standards, alignment will be good for animal welfare, but where we have moved ahead, alignment would be a step backwards (or UK producers could be put at an economic disadvantage).



Image Credit: SRUC Image Library

Other specific issues

Production of foie gras (from force-fed geese) is illegal in the UK and a proposal to ban its import was in Labour’s manifesto, but not in Defra’s new (Dec 2025) Animal welfare strategy for England¹⁹, and may be a casualty of SPS negotiations. Meat from cattle given vaccines for bovine TB is currently not permitted to be sold in the EU, and this could limit the UK’s options if accepted in an SPS. Since 2023 gene editing of crops and livestock has been permitted in the UK²⁰ but not EU, which could limit the progress of this technology which has the potential to enhance animal welfare (for example through edits for disease resistance). If SPS negotiations include zoo and companion animals there could be welfare risks and benefits.



Image Credit: SRUC Image Library

Policy Implications

- Within the UK-EU reset, an SPS deal would be the most consequential for animal welfare, but nothing is yet certain as negotiations are ongoing.
- SPS deal means alignment and dynamic alignment with EU rules with ‘limited exceptions’ for the UK. This could limit UK policy makers’ future choices on farm animal welfare, and sets a minimum standard.
- If UK policy makers set standards higher than EU, that could economically disadvantage UK producers.
- EU exit has left the UK as rule takers without a seat at the table in designing future animal welfare regulation.

For more information on this work please contact:

E: rick.death@sruc.ac.uk

T: 07973 776850

W: <https://sefari.scot/research/projects/eu-exit-challenges-and-opportunities-for-animal-welfare>

@SEFARIScot

info@sefari.scot



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

¹⁸ <https://www.nfuonline.com/news/uk-eu-sps-negotiations/uk-eu-sps-negotiations-influence-and-transition/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england>

²⁰ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9557/>