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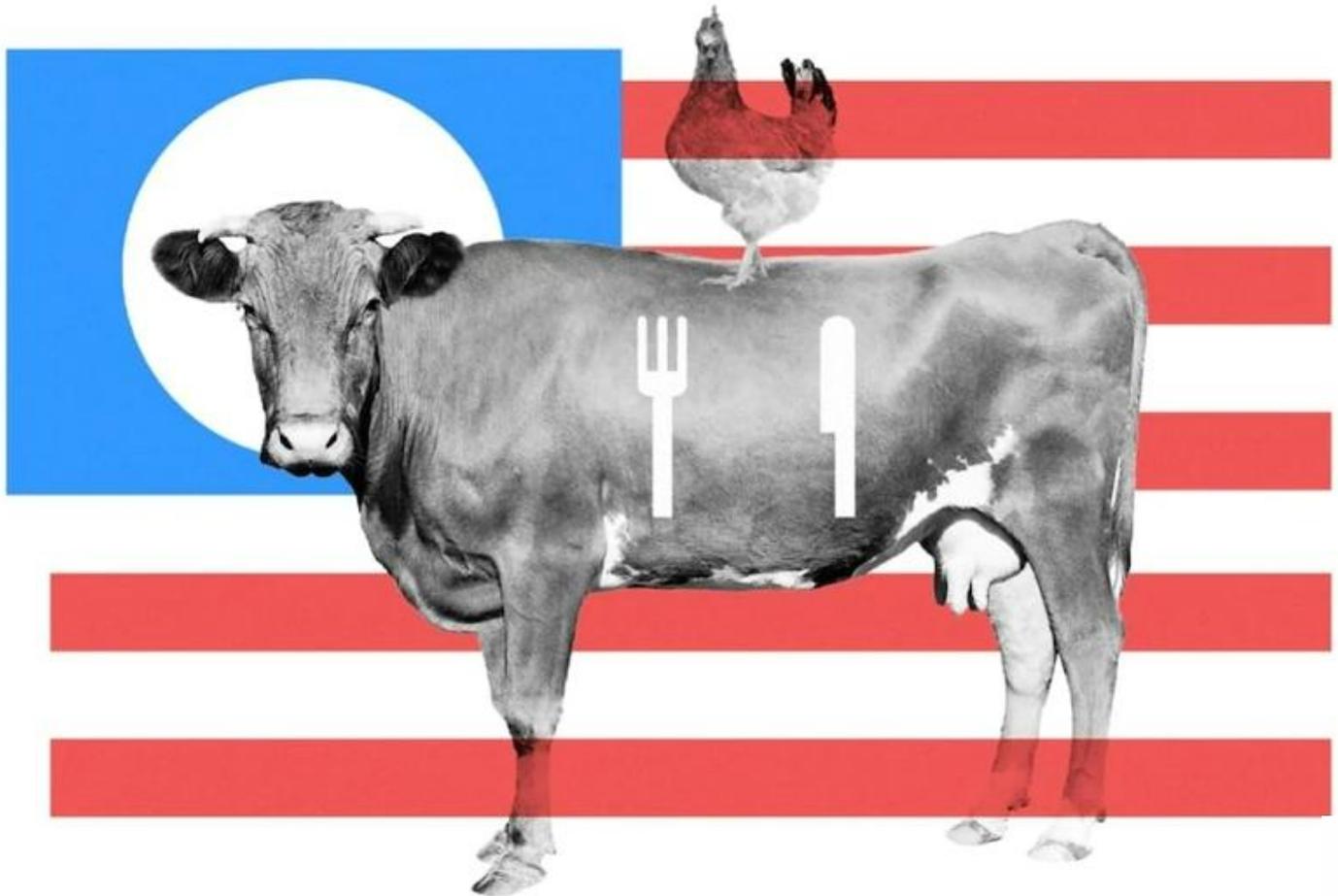
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Britain and US enter game of chicken on trade

Farming lobbyists are at odds with UK consumer groups amid trade talks overshadowed by chlorinated meat

By Lizzy Burden

18 July 2020 • 4:00pm

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While the Foreign Secretary meets his US counterpart at Downing Street on Tuesday,

across the pond farm lobby groups will be ramping up the pressure to bend UK agriculture to their will ahead of a [third round of trade talks](#). The industry is particularly influential in America, while UK consumer groups' invitation to the Government's new 16-member Trade and Agriculture Commission appears to have been lost in the post.

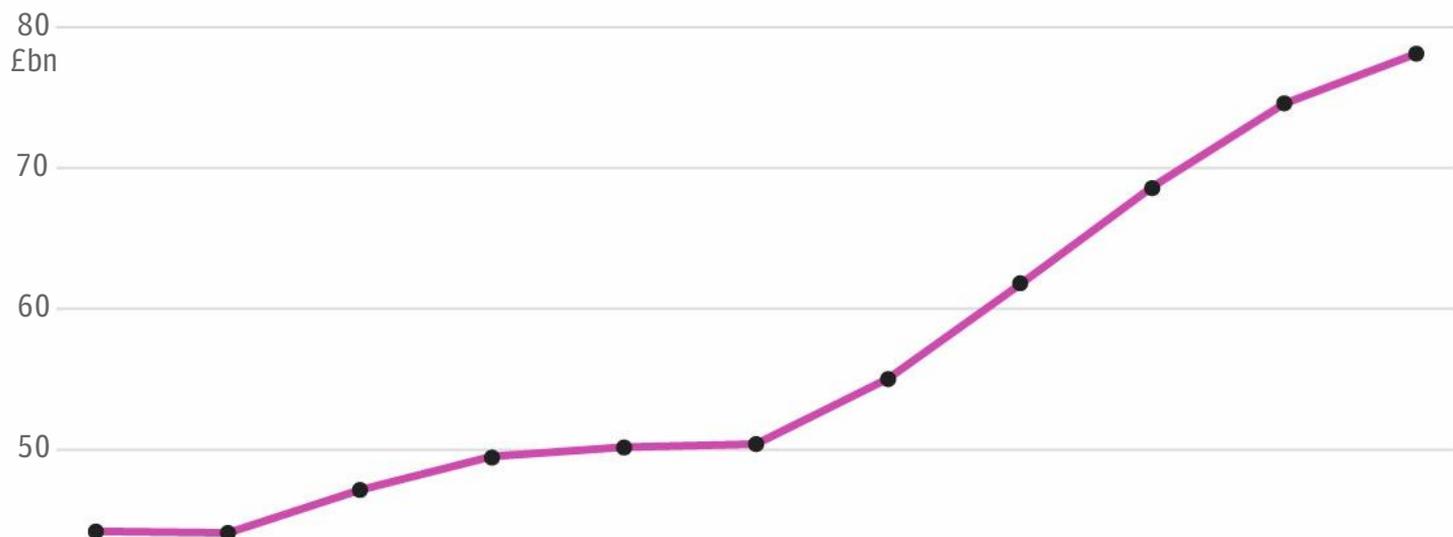
Which begs the question: will claims that [chlorinated chicken and hormone-fed beef](#) violate food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards inevitably be bulldozed?

The relationship between private sector interests and the office of the US trade representative (USTR) is much closer than their British equivalents. Darci Vetter, who was chief agricultural negotiator under president Obama, says: "You'll have representatives of different aspects within agriculture who can present their priorities or trade problems they're facing with a particular partner. They have an opportunity to look at the proposals, provide comments and stay abreast of the negotiations in a way that isn't played out in the press."

Behind the scenes, the screws are really turned. One former US trade negotiator remembers a sugar lobbyist "swarming" around a bar close to their office every night. "If you wanted a free drink or many other things, that guy was there," they said.

"They'll talk to the secretary but if they realise that someone a notch or two below is doing most of the work, they'll talk to you as well."

Total value of UK exports to the US



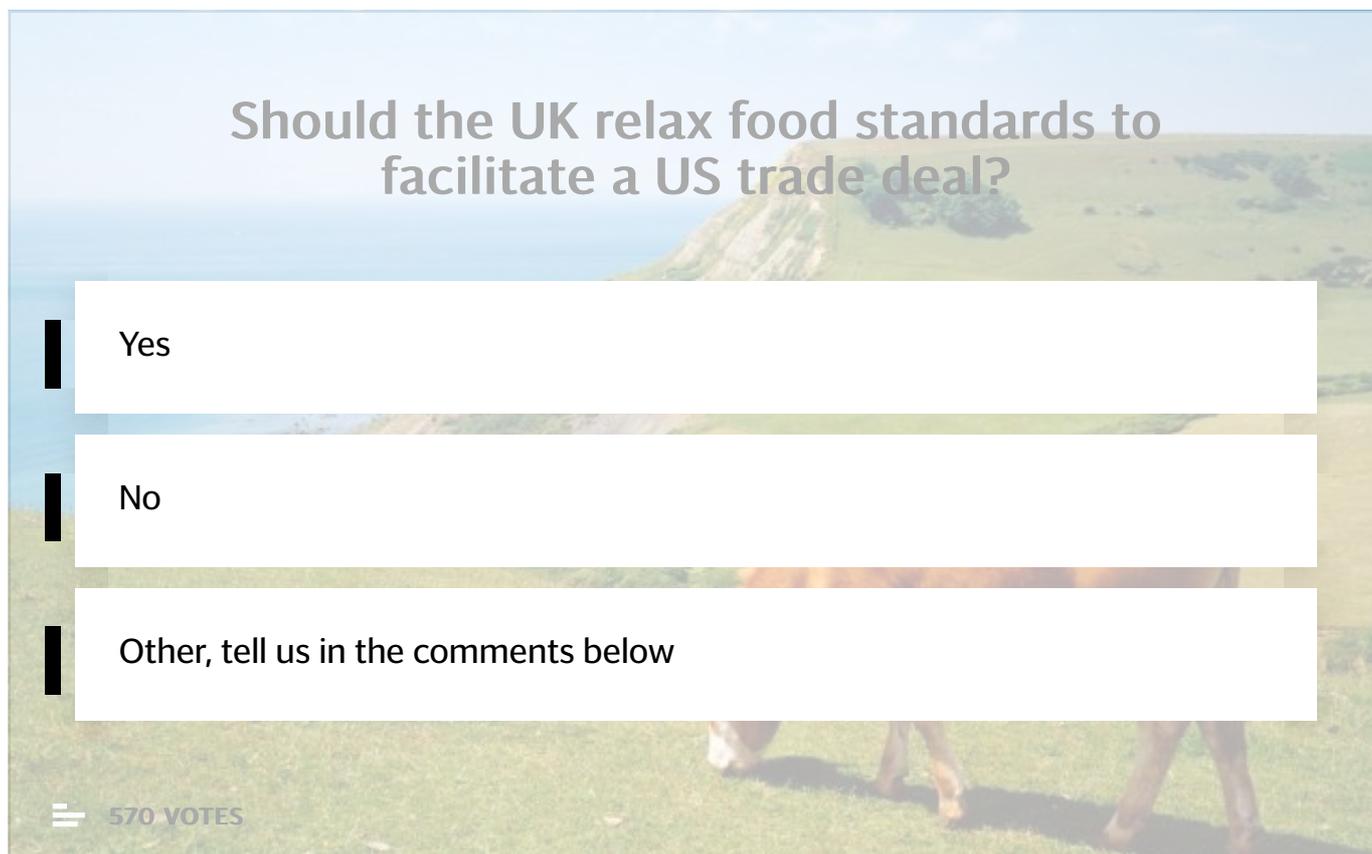
They also described the “revolving door” between the agricultural industry and the US government. “The industry loves it if you come with a Rolodex of government contacts that you can call on any issue,” they said.

Agricultural trade is an even more obscure world because of the high level of expertise required. Phil Levy, a former trade official in the George W. Bush administration, admits he found negotiations on agriculture “almost completely impenetrable”.

Lobby groups’ focus isn’t squarely on trade officials, though, as any trade bill must ultimately pass through Congress. Wendy Cutler, of the Asia Society Policy Institute and former acting deputy US trade representative, says agricultural groups “rely on exports more than other sector so they put a lot of resources into trying to sell a trade agreement to Congress. As a result, negotiators always want to make sure that there is a robust agriculture outcome in any trade agreement”.

Each state has two senators, so sparsely populated larger states with agriculture-dominated economies are over-represented in the upper chamber. One example is Iowa, whose senator Chuck Grassley is chairman of the Senate financial committee. Levy describes him as “very well attuned to the interests of the agricultural community”. If a congressman proves unmalleable, Levy recalls, “people lay down expressions of concern to signal what will happen later. Sometimes that’s to say, ‘we’ll withhold support unless you do everything we want’”.

Levy notes that a [Biden administration](#) could be more susceptible to pressure from the farm lobby because as a former senator, he “will be acutely aware of what it takes to get a bill through”. Vetter agrees not much would change under her former boss’s deputy: “I would still imagine a strong science-based approach to regulation of US agricultural products.



Should the UK relax food standards to facilitate a US trade deal?

Yes

No

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“Using [chlorinated chicken](#) is a proxy for something else. It’s a code word for a broad-brush painting of US agriculture as one giant corporate farm. The debate is much more around competition.”

Even the European Food Safety Authority has said chlorine-washed chicken is safe to eat. If there were issues, the UK would have the right under World Trade Organization rules to prohibit imports of unsafe food, or could use labelling to inform consumers about unsafe production.

However, Sue Davies, of the consumer group Which, argues labels won’t help because

“a lot of these products, if they’re cheaper, would be going into the catering sector or into highly processed foods”.

The main issue is animal welfare. America allows chickens to be bred on battery farms that would not be allowed in Britain, meaning the carcasses must be disinfected with strong chemicals due to the high risk of disease. But whether this argument can be used as a legal justification for prohibiting certain products is contested at the WTO.

David Salmonsens, senior director of governmental relations at the American Farm Bureau Federation, one of Washington’s most powerful lobbies, insists: “Our livestock is raised in a fine, humane way. This is not a new discussion.” The new chairman of the Government’s Trade and Agriculture Commission Tim Smith, a former Tesco executive, appears to agree. He has said the “alarmism” over chlorinated chicken must end.

FAQ | Chlorinated chicken

What is it?

After chickens are slaughtered and eviscerated, their carcasses are treated with strongly-chlorinated rinses (comparable to swimming pool water) in order to kill bacteria.

How common is it?

Although widely used in United States agriculture, such antimicrobial treatments are banned in the European Union.

Is it safe?

In the EU's view, chlorine washing is frequently used instead of maintaining proper hygiene throughout the food supply chain, such as on farms. Food companies could simply rinse carcasses and ship them out. In theory this would make it easier for diseases to cross over from animals to humans.

Unscrupulous producers could also use a chlorinated treatment to 'freshen up' perished meat that would otherwise be judged unfit for sale.

Why are farmers concerned?

It's cheaper than EU-style supply chain hygiene and UK farmers worry about being undercut by US companies that use it. On the other hand, if they adopt chlorine-washing and similar practices, they will face barriers to trading with the EU after Brexit.

Who likes it?

The US is particularly keen to get its food standards recognised and they are pushed as part of every potential trade deal. Notably, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations included the introduction of US chlorine-washed chicken and its like into the European Union. It's unclear if this is also true of the similar deal currently being negotiated between the EU and President Trump.

But the Policy Exchange think-tank warns in a report that "there is a risk that such a forum is captured by narrow producer interests at the expense of wider consumer welfare".

Davies shares this concern. Although Which is represented on the Government's strategic trade advisory group, she says: "That's a very high-level discussion – it doesn't get into the detail of what's in a particular trade deal. Then you've got the expert trade advisory groups, but the Government hasn't published who the members are. Those will be the ones that will be seeing more of the detail of potential negotiating texts at different stages as well."

However, for Vetter, that British consumer groups have managed to capture popular opinion could prove more powerful than the US farm lobby's access.

“In terms of overall GDP and agriculture's contribution to it, US agriculture punches above its weight when it comes to influencing trade policy, but consumer groups who have used agricultural production methods as a proxy for not wanting to let in foreign products in Europe control the politics around the conversation more.

“Farmers are much more powerful here but the NGO groups have really painted a narrative that's very hard to get out of for US agriculture on the other side.”



A chicken farm in Fairmont, North Carolina. The Government has denied that a trade deal will force Britain to accept looser food standards | CREDIT: RANDALL HILL/Reuters

Both sides want their opposing demands enshrined in the trade deal: Britain's lifting or continuation of the de facto ban under EU-inherited law on chlorinated chicken and hormone-treated beef. Salmonsens is confident: “Most of the world outside the EU accepts our chicken without a problem.

“We work closely with the office of the USTR. They know where we stand on these issues.”

That the talks seem to hinge on this question is a source of frustration for Gareth Hagan, deputy chief executive of Belfast-based trade and investment consultancy OCO Global, which advises the Department for International Trade. “The opportunities this trade deal holds have been magnified in a post-Covid world,” he says. “Digital trade, services – these are going to drive all sectors of the economy forward.”

But as Joseph Glauber, former chief economist for the US Department of Agriculture, who was also chief agricultural trade negotiator for the US at the WTO, puts it: “If the agricultural groups aren’t going to get behind this agreement, there’s no way you can get a trade agreement.”

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