

# Trade commission set to make first proposals

By Josh Loeb

THE first core recommendations to the government offered up by the new Trade and Agriculture Commission will include a proposal that the UK should aid developing countries to improve their farming practices.

The commission, an independent advisory body, has a role in setting parameters by which future trade deals can be assessed and the government held to account by food producers and consumers on animal welfare and environmental issues.

Set up to scrutinise post-Brexit trade deals, the commission was bolstered last year when it was placed on a statutory footing after pressure from parliamentarians anxious about the prospect of the UK being flooded with cheap food imports (*VR*, 14/21 November 2020, vol 187, p 380).

Now the commission's chair, Tim Smith (a former head of the Food Standards Agency), has given a flavour of what its inaugural report to Defra secretary George Eustice, set to be released next month, will contain.

At a session on trade at the virtual Oxford Farming Conference on 7 January, Smith said the report would outline an 'ambitious, clear, practical vision for what the UK's approach to global trade in agrifood commodities and products should aim to deliver'.

This, he said, would comprise several core principles, including:

- Maintaining the UK's standards and values in import and export policy.
- The UK 'taking a lead in leveraging international bodies to raise and champion high standards', including in environmental protection, animal welfare and ethical trade.
- Supporting farmers and food producers to grow their businesses, both in the UK and overseas, to ensure that rural economies can continue to prosper.
- Providing targeted support to



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help developing countries to meet international animal welfare and environmental standards.

The proposal for the UK to be more engaged in helping farmers in developing parts of the world to bring their agricultural practices up to those of farmers in more developed countries mirrors an idea floated by vet and Conservative MP Neil Hudson.

In an interview with *Vet Record* last year he suggested that a portion of the UK's foreign aid budget might be used to help farmers in Africa to improve their animal husbandry techniques so they could trade with the UK (*VR*, 11/18 July 2020, vol 187, pp 8–9). Hudson said the UK could be a 'beacon to the rest of the world' and argued that such an approach would bring mutual benefits.

Smith said the commission's recommendations would be 'supported by case studies which show where the UK is already a leading trading partner' and would 'point to potentially untapped opportunities for businesses and farmers large and small'.

In addition, he pledged the commission would 'give farmers and consumers a stronger voice', adding that one upside of the Covid-

19 pandemic was that it appeared to have increased public interest in food supply chains and how food is produced – perhaps because of concerns early on about the impact of the pandemic on food supply and the 'key worker' status accorded to food producers.

'The essence of consumer interest in food has never been greater,' Smith said. 'We've never seen our population more interested in their food and its provenance.'

During the same trade session, Smith's fellow panelists James Bailey, executive director of Waitrose, and Ash Amirahmadi, managing director of Arla Foods UK, also identified potential reputational benefits arising from the pandemic and how it had raised awareness of the role farmers play in 'feeding the nation'.

Bailey said there was a 'huge opportunity for the UK agricultural sector to continue to develop', adding: 'We [retailers] also have a role, in my opinion, to promote Britishness and to drive that quality brand we all have confidence in.'

Amirahmadi said: 'I have a firm belief that as an industry...we'll actually come out of Covid in a much stronger position than we went into it in. Why do I say that? Because I believe the crisis has woken the industry up to the role that it plays in society.' ●



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