

The EU reset and SPS agreement - What does it mean for the farming sector?

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Contents

Contributors	3
Introduction	4
Dynamic alignment	5
EU position	6
Opportunities	7
Potential pitfalls	8
Message to Government	9



Contributors



Dave Bench



Alistair Carmichael



John Clarke



Ed Barker

Dave Bench, CropLife UK

Dave Bench is the chief executive of CropLife UK, the voice of the UK plant science industry. As chief executive, has overall responsibility for all CropLife UK activities promoting the essential role of science and innovation in protecting food, parks, gardens, roads and railways; and advocating good stewardship, better regulation and best practice.

Alistair Carmichael, Liberal Democrat MP

Alistair Carmichael is chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and Liberal Democrat MP for Orkney and Shetland.

John Clarke

John Clarke was until recently a director for international trade at the European Commission in Brussels, and is a former Head of the EU Delegation to the World Trade Organisation. He is now a Fellow of Maastricht University, a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, and a member of the British Trade and Business Commission, among numerous other things. He has thirty five years experience as a trade negotiator including agriculture. The British Trade and Business Commission develops recommendations to the UK government on means to improve trade relations with the EU.

Ed Barker, AIC

Ed Barker is head of policy and external affairs at the Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC), joining in 2020. The AIC represents agri-supply businesses in the UK, covering five sectors: seed, arable marketing, animal feed, fertilisers, and crop protection whilst running a number of trade assurance schemes. In this role, he leads on policy and overseeing the AIC's UK Government affairs activity.

AIC is represented by four European Trade Associations, COCERAL, FEFAC, Euroseeds and EFBA. Ed is a Board Member of COCERAL, the European association representing the trade in cereals, oilseeds, pulses, and agro-supply.

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What does it mean for the farming sector?

Introduction

Back in May, the Prime Minister announced a new agreement with the European Union to support British businesses, back British jobs, and put more money in people's pockets.

A new sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement would be part of the deal, which the Government said would 'make it easier for food and drink to be imported and exported'.

SPS standards are rules which ensure the food which is imported into the UK is safe for consumers as well as to prevent pests and diseases spreading amongst animals and plants.

The deal is part of the Government's plans to 'reset' the UK's relationship with the EU.

But CropLife UK chief executive Dave Bench warned if the implementation of the transition was rushed and not well thought out it could cause some really significant challenges for the sector.

Dynamic alignment

Dynamic regulatory alignment has emerged as the cornerstone of negotiations the **sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement**.

Alistair Carmichael, chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, explained in practical terms, it requires the UK to remain aligned with EU regulations in exchange for easier market access.

The arrangement offers significant advantages, particularly the removal of costly border checks and paperwork. However, it comes with a notable drawback: the UK must stay in lockstep with rules it has no formal say in making.

John Clarke highlighted the concept was agreed 'with complete silence' following Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's announcement of the EU reset. The UK's acceptance of dynamic alignment and continued European Court of Justice involvement surprised many in Brussels.

The panel highlighted other countries trading with the EU using this concept. Switzerland recently completed an SPS agreement incorporating dynamic alignment, while Norway has maintained similar arrangements through EFTA membership for decades. Both countries have demonstrated that such agreements can work effectively over extended periods.

Mr Carmichael emphasised success depends heavily on negotiation quality. In some areas, like precision breeding, he suggested the UK may actually pull the EU towards England's more progressive position rather than moving backwards. The extent to which the UK can carve out bespoke arrangements will ultimately depend on political will among the Commission and member states.

EU position

The European Union appears well-positioned and enthusiastic about securing an **SPS agreement with the UK, according to John Clarke.**

Mr Clarke said, from talking to former colleagues, it seemed Brussels views the negotiations as relatively straightforward. The Commission's assessment recognises that the UK remains 95% aligned with EU regulations. This substantial existing alignment should make technical negotiations considerably easier.

The EU has significant economic motivations for reaching an agreement. While often portrayed as primarily benefiting the UK, the EU exports approximately €40 billion worth of agri-food products annually to Britain, compared to the UK's €15 billion exports to the continent. Eliminating costly inspections and border procedures would substantially benefit European exporters.

Mr Clarke's recent discussions with former colleagues in Brussels revealed a 'very positive, very optimistic' attitude toward negotiations.

Alistair Carmichael noted there was a significant political willingness in Brussels to conclude a deal, which simply was not the case even just one year earlier.



Opportunities

The proposed agreement presents substantial opportunities for **British agriculture and the wider food sector.**

The most immediate benefit would be the elimination of costly border checks and paperwork which has impacted the sector since Brexit. Export health certificates and phytosanitary certificates, which currently add significant expenses to consignments, would be removed. Mr Clarke said UK farmers and food producers would see benefits through lower transportation and freight costs.

For Northern Ireland, the opportunities are particularly significant. Ed Barker highlighted that groupage consignments—where mixed goods are sent on single

pallets—which stopped post-Brexit, could resume. The reduction in duplication and paperwork would benefit both farmers and consumers, whilst potentially saving UK taxpayers considerable sums currently spent on implementation schemes.

The seed sector, where European companies currently face delays of six to seven weeks compared to three days pre-Brexit, would see dramatic improvements in efficiency.

Potential pitfalls

Despite optimism surrounding the **proposed agreement, panelists identified significant implementation challenges** that could undermine **potential benefits**.

Dave Bench from CropLife UK warned that the greatest risk lies not in regulatory alignment but in how decisions are implemented. His primary concern centres on plant protection products where GB and EU regulators have made different decisions since Brexit.

The most serious pitfall involves maximum residue levels (MRLs). Mr Bench explained if the UK overnight replaces GB decisions with EU ones, growers would face immediate crises. Notable divergence exists for fungicides on brassicas, leafy vegetables, herbs, berries, and fruit, plus insecticides across most UK fruit.

“Now, if you are a cherry grower or an apple grower, you cannot suddenly say, you know what, I am going to grow something different this year,” he said.

He suggested a solution was to say in future there would be a single regulatory regime but to say the decisions made in both GB and the EU have been legitimate over the last few years.

“If we want to bring them together, bring them together at a point in future where that single regulatory regime takes a common decision,” he said, highlighting GB uses, as well as EU uses need to have been considered.

Ed Barker said in many cases the misalignments were ‘for perfectly sensible reasons’ and requiring alignment would be a huge adjustment for the supply chain.

He highlighted glyphosate and the conditions of use, adding desiccation was very important in the UK and Defra and the negotiators needed to be aware of situations like this.

“If we were to align on conditions of use in many cases that will create considerable challenges for cereal crops and oilseeds.”





Message to Government

Panellists delivered pointed advice to Government negotiators on an SPS agreement.

Alistair Carmichael said the process is 'just too important to be left to ministers and civil servants'.

He stressed that farmers' voices must be heard at the heart of negotiations, warning that without proper industry input, Britain could be 'stuck for years for something that could give us the worst of all possible worlds'.

Dave Bench called for comprehensive impact assessments before Government makes commitments. He said officials must understand the consequences of their choices on individual farming sectors before signing any deal.

"At this point, what I am not confident about is that Government is actually going to do that impact assessment before it signs up to a deal," he warned.

Ed Barker stressed the need for granular, sector-specific analysis. Unlike the chaotic pre-Brexit period, Government must examine sub-sectors individually—from mycotoxins in oats to feed additives in ruminants—and scenario plan potential outcomes.

He also emphasised clear communication with farmers who will bear the consequences.

John Clarke highlighted the importance of top-down ministerial engagement on both sides alongside expert input.

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