

Dear

On Wednesday, the Agriculture Bill returns to the House of Commons for its final stages before heading to the House of Lords.

As representatives of farming, consumer, environmental and animal welfare organisations across the UK, we are urging you to take this last proper opportunity to ensure that the Bill secures vital safeguards for the high standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection that the public value so highly. At this time of crisis, you have the opportunity to ensure that UK farmers can produce the sustainable, healthy food we need knowing that they will not be undercut by low standards imports as a result of future trade policy, while meeting the public's strong expectation that food standards will be maintained.

The debate on the Bill comes at a time when, due to Brexit, we are fundamentally reassessing our trading relationship with partners in the EU and across the world. It also coincides with one of the most serious crises the world has faced in a generation in the form of the coronavirus (COVID-19), and the ongoing challenges of climate change and biodiversity decline. Taken together, these challenges should focus minds on what exactly we want UK farming to deliver – a sustainable farming system that nurtures our natural environment, while producing food from it so that it not only underpins the needs and expectations of our people today but also of future generations.

This will require support from Government through both domestic policy and trade policy. The Bill presents an important opportunity to do this, and many of its current provisions will help. There may be a range of views as to the best way of achieving that outcome. But we are all agreed that a trade policy that undermines our farmers by requiring them to compete against food produced to lower standards will mean that our common goal of a more prosperous and sustainable food and farming sector will be made much harder to achieve.

The Bill lacks any formal requirement to uphold UK farming production standards as we negotiate trade deals and in our general trade policy. The Bill should ensure that agricultural imports are produced to at least equivalent environmental, animal welfare, and food safety standards as those required of producers in the UK. There are a number of amendments being brought forward on Wednesday which seek to achieve this outcome, and we believe the House should support these amendments – particularly NC1, NC2 and NC6 – to ensure the Bill is properly amended to secure the UK's standards. MPs must not miss this final opportunity.

We have heard concerns that such an approach would restrict the UK's ability to sign post-Brexit trade deals and would prevent the UK achieving the maximum benefit from its decision to leave the EU. We believe the opposite is true. At a time of global crisis where we are witnessing the erection of trade barriers across the world, the UK can demonstrate international leadership in promoting a progressive model of free trade fit for the 21st century. Amending the Bill to enshrine the importance of food trade, but only where high standards of production are met, will allow the UK to be a standard bearer for sustainable production and climate-friendly farming across the world.

We hope you will participate in Wednesday's debate. If UK farming is to face the future as a vital strategic sector, producing the food we eat and meeting the challenges of climate change, food security and the high expectations of the UK public in the way we treats our farmed animals and wildlife, the Bill must not undermine that very goal by allowing in food imports that fail to meet its high ideals.

Yours sincerely,