

The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

cc The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency

25th May 2022

Dear George,

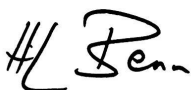
Last week, as co-convenors of the UK Trade and Business Commission, we visited a fruit farm in Kent as well as the Port of Dover. The aim was to learn more about how our agricultural trade is being affected by Government trade policy. Our visit has left us with a number of questions surrounding investment in food production, the impact on our food security, and the comparative advantage given to food imported to the UK over that produced here.

Winterwood Farms is a leading UK grower of soft fruits. However, since 2017 they have been investing in capacity outside of the UK because of concerns about not having the ability to expand further in this country. In 2022 this has led them to reduce the amount of crops they are planting and to rely on imports to fill any gaps this will leave. There are various related reasons for these decisions:

- Their access to labour is severely constrained, compared to a previous model of operations involving students and young workers coming from Europe. UK labour is not available locally, universal credit does not support seasonal work, and Home Office visa schemes are too costly in terms of their bureaucracy. The UK's departure from the European Union has impacted on the farm's ability to recruit seasonal workers, which last year left 8% of their crop unpicked. At a time of food cost pressures for families, surely we need as much homegrown, fresh and healthy produce made available to consumers as possible;
- It is more difficult to export food. The failure to reach an SPS agreement with the EU means that the previous option of exporting surplus production that can't be sold in the UK is no longer viable due to likely delays in certification.
- Importing food is easier, due to the absence of checks on produce coming from the EU. Similarly, we heard that the Australia and New Zealand trade deals offer little to help our exporters compared to the benefit to their producers.
- Farms are choosing which crops to prioritise, to ensure they can stay profitable. This is leading to an oversupply of some crops such as strawberries, as they are no longer easily exported to EU member states. Given the cost of living crisis, and current issues around food inflation, this is deeply concerning.

I am sure you will agree UK producers finding it easier to import food rather than produce it here is problematic for a number of reasons. We should be grateful to meet with you and discuss steps the Government is taking to tackle these issues and offer some suggestions based on evidence the Commission has taken. If you could liaise with our Secretariat to find a meeting at a time that is mutually convenient, that would be appreciated. We are copying this letter to Jacob Rees-Mogg as Minister for Brexit Opportunities.

Yours Sincerely,



Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP
Co-Convenor of the UK Trade and Business Commission



Peter Norris
Co-Convenor of the UK Trade and Business Commission