

# **Consequences to the UK's Animal Health and Welfare following the Decision to leave the European Union**

## **Consecuencias para la Salud y el Bienestar de los Animales del Reino Unido tras la Decisión de abandonar la Unión Europea**

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### *Abstract*

In spring 2019, the United Kingdom (UK) will officially leave the European Union (EU), a decision made following the referendum held in June 2016. On leaving the EU's single market, the UK will thereby lose the right to the free movement of goods, capital, services and people across the EU. This will have various consequences, inevitably affecting animal trade and working legislation. In the short term, considering 90% of vets working in the public health sector are of EU origin, there are concerns for animal health. However, in the long term, EU-independence provides scope for improvements in animal welfare.

*Keywords: animal welfare, Europe, referendum, Brexit.*

### *Resumen*

En la primavera de 2019, el Reino Unido (RU) dejará oficialmente la Unión Europea (UE), una decisión tomada tras el referéndum celebrado en junio de 2016. Al salir del mercado único de la UE, el RU perderá el derecho a la libre circulación de dinero, bienes, capital, servicios y personas en toda la UE. Esto tendrá varias consecuencias, lo que inevitablemente afectará el comercio de animales y la legislación laboral. A corto plazo, considerando que el 90% de los veterinarios que trabajan en el sector de la salud pública son de origen comunitario, existen preocupaciones por la salud animal. Sin embargo, a largo plazo, la independencia de la UE ofrece margen para mejorar el bienestar de los animales.

*Palabras clave: bienestar de los animales, Europa, referéndum, Brexit.*

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## Introduction

In the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK) adheres to both its own law and that set out by the EU. National level UK legislation, covering topics such as tail docking and fox hunting, is likely to be unaffected after the withdrawal from the EU in 2019. However, the UK currently adheres to 44 EU legislations specific to animal welfare. In fact, approximately 80% of UK animal welfare legislation originates from the EU, covering everything from animal transport to welfare at slaughter (Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals; RSPCA, 2016b). This work examines how the future of animal health and welfare in the UK is likely to be affected after it leaves the EU, by evaluating the probable changes to the economic and rights of European workers.

### Impacts to small animal welfare

A huge number of animals enter and leave the UK each year. In 2013, the EU amended the law allowing free movement of dogs, cats and ferrets between member states via the pet passport scheme. Since then, importation of puppies has soared to 60,000 per year, presenting a huge welfare concern, not only for the puppies involved, often transported long distances with falsified documents; but also for the breeding bitches (RSPCA, 2016a). This aside, there is no guarantee these animals are vaccinated, posing a threat to the disease status of rabies, for example, in the UK, where it has been eradicated since 1970 (World Animal Health Information System; WAHIS, 2016). An independent UK will have the freedom and direct control to tackle these problems; it is clear that the current system is open to abuse. Tighter border control is almost indefinite, with 33% of leave voters citing ‘immigration and the need to regain control of the borders’ as the biggest factor in making their decision (Ashcroft, 2016). With more restrictions and control, hopefully this inhumane trade can be stopped.

### Impacts to the health and welfare of British livestock

The UK is often considered a front-runner in animal welfare – banning the use of sow-stalls and veal crates years before they were phased out under EU ruling (RSPCA, 2016a). The UK has expressed interest in banning live animal export in the past, even temporarily banning the practice in 2012 – only for the suspension to be lifted after it was ruled to breach EU free trade rules (RSPCA, 2016a). Nevertheless, the UK failed to sign agreements in 2014 and 2015 to improvements in animal welfare at EU level, despite it being supported by Holland, Germany and Denmark (RSPCA, 2016a). It was the EU that introduced higher welfare poultry production and the compulsory labelling of eggs, for example, with the UK then

having to follow suit under legislation. However, higher animal welfare comes at a cost; the move from barren battery cages to enriched cages for chickens, under EU legislation 1999-2012, cost UK farmers an estimated £25 per hen (RSPCA, 2016b). Common agricultural payments totalled €3 billion in 2014, equating to 55% of UK farming incomes that year. Yet, in 2015, less than 0.1% of the £3.5 million British farmers received from the EU was directed at animal welfare (RSPCA, 2017). Support is promised until 2020, and without EU membership, there will be more freedom in exactly how it can be spent. UK Agricultural Minister George Eustice suggests Britain can introduce subsidisation for welfare assurance schemes, by redirecting the money usually spent by the UK on the EU to where it is needed most (Veterinary Record, 2017). The UK’s total meat and dairy export was worth around £3.6 billion in 2016. The EU represents a huge market for British meat and is the destination of over 90% of beef and 70% of lamb exports each year (ADAS, 2016). Aside from financial importance to the agricultural industry, the trade is also essential to the UK, as it is not self-sufficient in terms of meat production (ADAS, 2016). The concern is that after current trade agreements are compromised, there will be more pressure on British farmers to compete with the EU market, driving the demand of cheaper, lower welfare meat. Actions should be taken to ensure market competitiveness does not compromise higher animal welfare. With regard to the slaughter of animals, the UK can now implement stricter rules to include closed circuit television monitoring in abattoirs. Additionally, the prohibition of non-stun slaughter is a possibility; although already implemented in 3 EU member states, it will be far easier to introduce the ban in an independent UK (RSPCA, 2016a).

### Economic impacts

Whilst EU funding has supported UK welfare projects such as the move towards higher-welfare cages for hens, subsidisation also plays a pivotal role in various disease control and surveillance programmes. Up to 50% of the government’s cost for disease eradication programmes is covered by the EU. TB eradication schemes, Salmonella and Bluetongue control, for example, have all benefitted from EU funding (RSPCA, 2016b). Today, antimicrobial resistance is one of the biggest threats to animal and public health, and without funding from the EU, it’s of concern how the UK aims to tackle potential outbreaks in the future. It is imperative that, despite changes in funding, the relationship between the UK and the EU remains strong; good cooperation has been essential for recent outbreaks of Schmallenberg and Avian Influenza, for example. However, membership of the OIE should ensure this (RSPCA, 2016b). Without the necessity to comply with EU regulation, the UK will have greater freedom in its disease control and decisions concerning animal health. DEFRA, NOAH and NFU

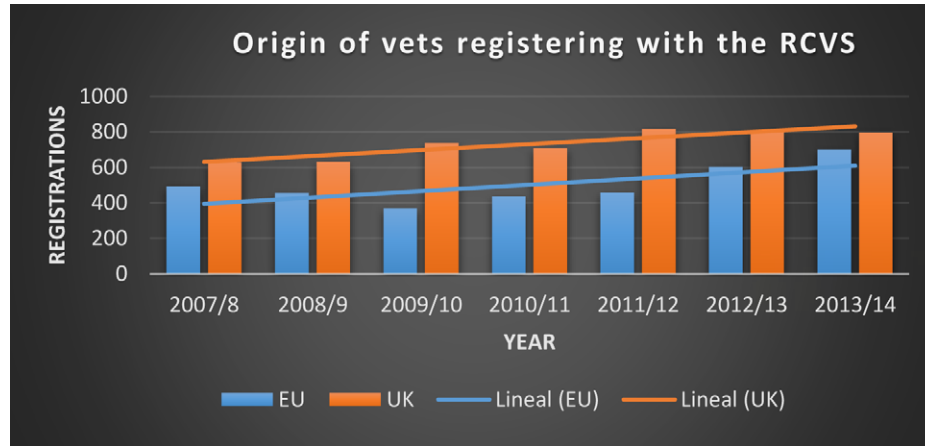


Figure 1. Graph showing the number of vets from the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) registering with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) between 2007/8 and 2013/4.

Scotland, for example, will be able to focus time and money on diseases of concern specifically to the UK, such as sheep scab and bovine viral diarrhoea, which are overlooked by the EU (“Planning amid uncertainty”, 2016).

### Impacts on the veterinary profession and animal health

Any veterinarian wishing to practice in the UK must register with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). As demonstrated in figure 1, data from the RCVS shows that since 2007, the number of vets registering to work in the UK has increased each year. The number of those from the EU also follows this trend, increasing from 435 in 2010/11 to 701 in 2013/14. Between 2011/12 and 2013/14, the number of UK registrants, however, has slowly decreased. The proportion of the total registrants made up by EU vets was 42.8% in 2013/4, compared to 52.2% of those from the UK; representing a difference of only 94 more vets.

It is therefore evident that vets of EU origin make up a huge part of the British veterinary work force. Worryingly for the UK, is that 90% of the vets working in public health, including meat inspectors and official veterinarians in slaughterhouses are of foreign origin, the majority being from within the EU (RCVS, 2016). The future of the working rights for such vets is uncertain, but whether qualifications will continue to be recognised, for example, is a concern. Given the vital role these experienced vets play in the British veterinary field, if, following the withdrawal from the EU, they are made to leave the UK, it poses a huge threat to food security and animal health.

### Conclusion

There are many decisions to be made and formalised before the UK officially leaves the EU and currently it is very

unclear as to what exactly the consequences shall be. Ultimately, the future is relatively uncertain, however it appears that in terms of animal welfare, leaving the EU provides definite scope for improvement within the UK. In the short term however, the uncertainty of the future of specialised EU vets is a huge concern, and may threaten services to animal health.

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