

Brexit:

Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Communities

This paper is an information briefing for churches on how Britain's departure from the European Union might affect farming and fishing communities.

"He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate - bringing forth food from the earth" – Psalm 104:13-14. This psalm reminds us of the holistic nature of creation and the creator, something which we must not forget, especially when discussing Brexit.

What is the current situation in the UK?

In the UK we are blessed to have huge swathes of countryside and to be an island with an expansive coast. This means that agriculture and fishing have been, and continue to be, important industries to the UK economy. The Agri-food sector in the UK contributed £112 billion in 2017.¹ The sector employs 3.8 million people UK wide which is 13.1 percent of GB employment² and 24 percent of all business registered in England are registered in rural areas. In 2017 we spent £203bn on food and drink and the value of our food and drinks export is estimated to be £20.1bn.³ There were 4,000 businesses registered as being part of the fishing industry in 2016. These businesses employed 24,000 people and contributed £1.4bn to the UK economy.⁴

What opportunities does Brexit bring?

Brexiters and the government are keen to point out the opportunities for the agriculture and fisheries industry. Thérèse Coffey, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, stated that "leaving the EU gives us an opportunity to have policies to support the rural economy that are bespoke to the needs of this country".⁵ The opportunities that could arise for the agriculture and fisheries industries come by leaving the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). These two EU wide policies determine how the agriculture and fisheries industries operate in the UK and aim to support farmers and fishers in the EU giving their produce an advantage over produce from outside the EU. This involved subsidies, quotas and regulations, some of which are controversial in the agriculture and fisheries industry/ies in the UK.

One of CAP's most controversial policies is the 'three-crop rule' also known as a 'crop diversification measure'. The aim of the policy was to stop mono-cropping in Europe, however, Tim Breitmeyer, Deputy President of the Country Land and Business Association argues that the policy does, "not fit our farming model at all well here".⁶ The CFP is even more controversial and is probably the reason that most fishing groups were pro-Brexit.

The CFP brings all the EU member states' waters into an Exclusive Economic Zone which means that the same regulations apply across all the waters and so fishing vessels from all member states can catch fish in the waters of all other member states. Having one set of regulations for all the seas in the EU might seem like a good idea, but it is not perceived to be a good deal from a British perspective. In 2015, non-British EU vessels caught 683,000 tonnes of fish worth £484 million in UK waters,⁷ but UK vessels only caught 111,000 tonnes worth £114 million in revenue in non-British EU member states' waters. Furthermore, around 40% of the Danish fishing fleet's total catch comes from the 200-mile zone which Britain would control if it was not in the CFP, and some Danish fishing communities rely entirely on catching fish within the bounds of what used to be Britain's territorial waters.⁸ Leaving the CAP and CFP could give Britain the opportunity to create policy which will be better tailored to British environmental needs and protect rural and coastal communities in the UK better.

What challenges does Brexit bring?

While Brexit presents opportunities for the agriculture and fisheries industry there are also a number of challenges. One of these is access to seasonal workers. The industry claims that it needs 80,000 seasonal workers to supplement the full time staff. These seasonal staff pick fruit and harvest vegetables during the harvesting season. In 2016, it is thought that there were 75,000 seasonal workers in the UK and 98% of those workers are migrants from elsewhere

in the EU⁹. Since the EU referendum the number of seasonal workers coming to the UK has dropped by 17% leaving some farms critically short of people to harvest fruit and vegetables according to the NFU.¹⁰ If there is no free movement of labour after Brexit, the industry could face a huge shortfall in seasonal workers which will make it hard for all the crops to be harvested. This will negatively affect farm and retail incomes as well as fruit and vegetable availability and prices, which disproportionately impacts those on low incomes.

Another challenge that the agriculture and fisheries industry faces is the possibility of delays at the borders. At the moment, the frictionless borders within the EU enable easy transportation of fresh fruit and vegetables. This means that when fresh produce arrives in the UK it has a substantial shelf-life. The British Retail Consortium have said that border controls would reduce the life of products which would drive up food waste in the home as well as in some cases making it unproductive to put these products into stores.¹¹ This could risk the food security of people in the UK – as the cost of food may increase.

There is also anxiety that there could 'a race to the bottom' on food standards and safety as we seek to trade with countries who have lower standards. However, the government have said that the current food standards will be maintained after the UK leaves the EU.¹²

What has the government said?

The government have promised an Agriculture Bill to "provide stability to farmers as we leave the EU" and "support our farmers to compete domestically and on the global market, allowing us to grow more, sell more and export more great British food"¹³, however this bill is yet to be published. It has also promised that the direct subsidies (Basic Payment Scheme) currently paid to farmers by the EU will be paid on the same basis for around 5 years after we leave the EU and then a new system of 'public money for public goods' will be implemented.¹⁴ Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has also said that the case for a seasonal agricultural worker scheme is compelling.¹⁵ We will need to wait for the Agriculture Bill to find out more about the government's plans for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Affairs post-Brexit.

What can you do?

Please continue to pray for all those who work in agriculture and fisheries industry as well as the communities who rely on those industries.

If you live in a rural community and have concerns about Brexit, don't hesitate to get in touch with your MP. Tell them what worries you about the future and ask the government to give rural communities enough time to adapt to any changes they choose to make after Brexit.

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- ² ONS (2018) UK Labour Market [online] [Labour Market Statistics \(ONS\)](#)
- ³ DEFRA (2017) Food Statistics Pocketbook [online] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-statistics-pocketbook-2017/food-statistics-in-your-pocket-2017-summary>
- ⁴ House of Commons Library (2017) debate pack – The UK Fishing Industry [online] <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2017-0256/CDP-2017-0256.pdf>
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- ⁶ House of Lord's European Union Committee (2017) Brexit Agriculture HL Paper 169 of session 2016-17 p47
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- ¹³ Queens speech (2017) Background Briefing Notes
- ¹⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxTikdCqS4o
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