

Press release: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The UK cannot continue to feed itself by offshoring its greenhouse gas emissions

A Carbon Border Adjustment ('CBA') tax is one policy proposal to make sure that imported goods do not have a greater environmental impact than those produced domestically. Whilst the idea of applying such a tax to imported agricultural inputs that have large climate and environmental footprints, like fertilisers and animal feed, is promising, applying it to individual food products is flawed. That was the verdict of the Food Ethics Council jury at its recent Food Policy on Trial event, which critically explored whether a CBA mechanism could positively contribute to food systems that are fair for people, animals and planet.

The UK recently agreed in principle to a controversial trade deal with Australia, which will allow tariff-free access of Australian products like beef to be imported to the UK. This sets a worrying precedent, risking undercutting UK food standards and potentially further increasing the environmental footprint of food consumed in the UK. Countries are not currently accountable for the climate impacts of imported food. This allows them to offshore their greenhouse gas ('GHG') obligations. In the UK nearly half of what is eaten is produced overseas. The European Commission is proposing a CBA mechanism as a way of levelling the playing field for European companies by holding imports accountable for their GHG emissions the same way that products produced in the EU are.

Would a CBA deliver net benefits for UK food systems? Very few have thought about CBA as it relates to food and farming – until now. In this public policy debate, expert witnesses were questioned by a jury of members of the Food Ethics Council, a UK-based independent think tank. Expert witnesses included Professor Dieter Helm of the University of Oxford and Angela Francis, Chief Advisor, Economics and Economic Development at WWF-UK, while jurors included writer and philosopher Julian Baggini and the Soil Association's Jo Lewis.

Having a mechanism to work out the precise greenhouse gas impact of beef imported from Australia and to reflect that via a tax may sound like a fairer approach in principle. However, the jury's verdict was that in practice applying CBA to individual food products would result in a minefield of metrics and may be an excuse for delaying action. If a CBA were to be brought in, then in relation to food and farming, our jury believed it makes more sense to focus on agricultural inputs with big climate footprints, like fertilisers and animal feed.

With a complex mechanism like CBA, expert witnesses highlighted the real danger of unintended consequences for the planet, animals and people, particularly on the poorest members of society – in the Global South and in the UK.

Our jury felt other measures were likely to fit better with the need for urgent, but considered, action to rapidly cut greenhouse gas emissions from food and farming globally. Solutions with greater potential include core food standards, import bans of undesirable products or practices and international standards, like GLOBALG.A.P, as ways to measure and control greenhouse gas emissions.

Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, commented that:

"The UK mustn't continue to pass the buck when it comes to food imports, by offshoring its environmental and social impacts. A UK Carbon Border Adjustment tax would seem to make most sense when applied to the import of major agricultural inputs like fertilisers and animal feed, rather than individual food products. Still, this would not address the substantial work needed in the UK food and farming sector to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We don't have time to delay action, given the urgency of the climate emergency. We need measures that will drive positive change more quickly, like core food standards, plus bans to take the worst villains off the shelves."

Notes to editors

For further information and interviews please contact Dan Crossley, Executive Director; 0333 012 4147/ dan@foodethicscouncil.org

[Food Policy on Trial](#) is a series of events organised and promoted by the Food Ethics Council. Designed to explore and scrutinise selected emerging food policy ideas at inquiry-style sessions, expert witnesses provide evidence and are then questioned by both a Food Ethics Council jury panel and members of the audience. Those attending can make their own considered judgements of whether the policy idea 'on trial' is likely to contribute to or hinder progress towards healthy, fair, environmentally sustainable, humane food and farming. Our Food Policy on Trial work is kindly supported by Polden Puckham Charitable Foundation.

The Tuesday 15th June 2021 event put CBA in the dock. The full audio recording is available to listen back to [here](#). The full jury's verdict is available [here](#).

Expert witnesses:

- **Professor Dieter Helm**, Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Oxford (pre-recorded contribution)
- **Angela Francis**, Chief Advisor, Economics and Economic Development, WWF-UK
- **Chiara Putaturo**, EU Inequality and Tax Policy Advisor, Oxfam
- **Jack Watts**, Agri-food Policy Delivery Manager, National Farmers' Union (NFU)

Note: this press release does not necessarily represent the views of the expert witnesses.

Food Ethics Council jury:

- **Pete Ritchie**, Executive Director of Nourish Scotland and organic farmer (Chaired the event)
- **Julian Baggini**, freelance writer and philosopher
- **Chloe Donovan**, Founder of Hundred River Farm
- **Ralph Early**, independent food scientist and ethicist
- **Jo Lewis**, Strategy & Policy Director, Soil Association

[The Food Ethics Council](#) is an independent UK think tank whose purpose is to bring ethics to the centre of the food system. Our mission is to accelerate the shift towards fair food systems that respect people, animals and the planet. Twitter: [@FoodEthicsNews](#); [LinkedIn](#)