

Vulnerability of the UK's food supply chains exposed by COVID-19, study reveals

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The UK has been left "dangerously dependent" on just two EU countries for its fresh vegetable imports, a new study on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the UK food system has revealed.

The study, published in *Nature Food*, also reveals that insufficient capacity in domestic [food](#) production, just-in-time supply chains and Brexit-related labour market challenges have all resulted in a weakened UK food system.

Building diversity and collaboration in the food system is essential for resilience in the COVID-19 recovery, the authors of the University of York study say.

The UK imports almost half of its food and 84% of its fresh fruit, and is heavily reliant on EU countries for vegetables and salads.

In particular, the UK is reliant on the Dover Strait maritime route and ferry services between Dover and Calais. Most importantly, it is "dangerously dependent" on the Netherlands and Spain for the majority of its fresh vegetable imports.

The report reveals that 83% of the lettuces we import come via Dover, along with 67% of tomatoes and 77% of strawberries.

Vulnerability

The authors of the study warn the UK's lack of diversity in sourcing of products remains a point of "acute vulnerability."

One of the authors of the study, Professor Bob Doherty, from York Management School and Chair for the N8 AgriFood research programme at the University of York, said: "COVID-19 is creating, and will continue to create, problems for food sector organisations, including disrupting their ability to produce goods and services.

"Reduced production in one part of the network will have knock-on effects for production elsewhere.

"Ordinarily such resource issues would either be resolved quickly or the deficit would be filled by another organisation in the network. COVID-19, however, might be enough of a systemic shock that mechanisms in the system that normally resolve problems can no longer function.

"The UK Government in partnership with the food industry must rethink this reliance on such a vulnerable food system in the COVID-19 recovery period. How the UK can grow more of its own food sustainably should be considered whilst also maintaining good trade relations with our EU partners. Hence, a sensible joined-up farming and trade policy that is evidence-based is required. "

The authors of the study also say the coronavirus pandemic could coincide with a 'no deal' Brexit, when the current transition period ends on 31st December 2020.

They say the free movement of goods provided by the single market was crucial in maintaining UK food supplies during the pandemic.

Seasonal workers

Professor Doherty added: "When it comes to food, COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for a good trade deal with the EU. Furthermore, between 70,000 to 80,000 seasonal workers come to the UK from the EU every [growing season](#) to support the UK harvest.

"The UK migration policy and associated restrictions on seasonal workers was already causing concern for UK growers and farmers even before the pandemic.

"It is too early to tell whether UK campaigns such as 'picking for Britain' will plug the gap in the seasonal labour force. In fact, some growers have

already chartered flights of seasonal workers from the EU to ensure their crops are harvested."

The authors of the study say another concern is that the COVID-19 pandemic could induce a secondary shock, such as price spikes of wheat.

In addition, climate change and shortages of machinery, sprays, fertilisers, feeds and packaging could hold up a range of critical agricultural tasks such as planting and harvesting, and lead to a reduction in yields.

Food sustainability

Co-author, Dr. Philip Garnett, from York Management School, University of York, added: "Systems can respond to shocks in very unpredictable ways, which might expose otherwise hidden vulnerabilities in multiple areas.

"It is clear we need a new strategic plan to reorientate the UK food system to grow more food sustainably in the UK.

"This will require new thinking and investment in British horticulture, a crop diversification strategy and assessment of the potential of new approaches such as indoor vertical farming.

"COVID-19 has also exposed the UK's vulnerability in terms of labour shortages, hence there needs to be an investment in skills and training for farming combined with investment in digital automation."

More information: Philip Garnett et al. Vulnerability of the United Kingdom's food supply chains exposed by COVID-19, *Nature Food* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s43016-020-0097-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-020-0097-7)

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