



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

UK-EU SPS reset – challenges and opportunities for UK agri-science

Notes of Meeting held on Tuesday 10 February 2026 Meeting Room R, Portcullis House

In attendance:

Charlie Dewhurst MP (Chair)
George Freeman MP
Lord Carrington
Earl of Caithness
Lord Taylor of Holbeach

Guest speakers:

Dave Bench, Chief Executive, CropLife UK
Dr Anthony Hopkins, Head of Policy, British Society of Plant Breeders (BSPB)
Gail Soutar, Head of Trade and Business Strategy, NFU

Stakeholder attendees:

Jonny Hazell, Royal Society; James Wallace, IAR Agri; Jonathan Little, US Embassy; Katherine Paulson, Thomson Reuters; Sarah Woolford, AHDB; Dr Janet Talling, Defra; Meinhard List, German Embassy; Ben Beresford, Defra; Jennifer Wilson, USSA; Feodora Rayner, CropLife UK; Dr Alan Bullion, Labour Food Security Forum; Chris Jackson, UKTAG; Sheridawn Schoeman, Corteva; Olivia Seccombe, British Sugar; Maddie Cass, BioIndustry Association; Prof Huw Jones, Aberystwyth University; Prof Johnathan Napier, Rothamsted Research; Jack Chivers, CLA; Keely Watson, Elsoms Seeds; Andrew Blazey, AICC; Angela Gibson, Bunge; Duncan Ribbons, Tropic; Helen Gillen, FDF; Ron Stobart, Sainsbury's; Michael O'Leary, HoC Committee Specialist; Tom Vincent, Food Standards Agency; Richard Potts, NFU; Daniel Pearsall, Group Co-ordinator.

1. Welcome and introduction

Charlie Dewhurst MP (CD) opened the meeting and welcomed attendees, briefly introducing the purpose of the meeting to examine the implications of a UK–EU Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement for UK agri-science, with particular focus on the potential impacts of plans for dynamic regulatory alignment with EU rules. CD noted that the House of Commons Efra Committee had recently published a report addressing related issues and that Parliamentary scrutiny would continue. While the Government had presented an SPS agreement in terms of the significant economic benefits on offer as a result of reduced trade friction, he emphasised the importance of examining both opportunities and risks in detail, particularly given the complexity and localised nature of agricultural regulations, and the potential long-term consequences for farm businesses, innovation and investment.

2. Guest speakers

Dave Bench, Chief Executive, CropLife UK

Dave Bench (DB) opened by setting out CropLife UK's perspective, focusing primarily on the implications of an SPS agreement for the regulation of plant protection products (PPPs), as well as the use of precision breeding techniques such as gene editing in UK crop production.

DB explained that since publication of the “common understanding” between the UK and EU in May 2025, CropLife UK had sought to understand how Defra was assessing potential SPS scenarios. He indicated that discussions with officials over the preceding eight to nine months had centred overwhelmingly on what could only be described as a “worst case” implementation model.

Under that scenario, on the first day of an SPS agreement entering into force - with an indicative timeline of mid-2027 - all GB decisions taken since EU exit in relation to plant protection products would effectively be set aside and replaced with the corresponding EU decisions on those substances and products. DB highlighted serious concerns about this approach, characterising it as a regulatory “cliff edge”.

He emphasised that EU decisions since Brexit had not been taken with GB agricultural conditions, cropping systems, or usage patterns specifically in mind. Replacing GB decisions wholesale would therefore risk removing products authorised for use under GB-specific circumstances. CropLife UK was concerned that alternative approaches were not being seriously considered by the UK Government.

To provide an independent assessment of potential impacts, DB explained that CropLife UK had commissioned the Andersons Centre to model three distinct scenarios:

1. Immediate “cliff edge” replacement of GB decisions with EU decisions on day one of an SPS agreement.
2. Replacement of GB decisions after a two-year delay.
3. A “managed alignment” model in which GB decisions taken post-Brexit would be mutually recognised, and alignment would occur as new decisions were taken, rather than retrospectively dismissing existing GB decisions.

DB reported that under the immediate cliff edge scenario, the Andersons modelling estimated a negative first-year impact on British growers of between £500 million and £810 million. This equated to approximately 7–11% of farm profit. He emphasised that some growers operate on margins as low as 1%, meaning such an impact could render farm businesses unviable. He added that the modelling covered 14 representative crops and therefore might underestimate total impact across agricultural and horticultural sectors.

DB indicated that the two-year delay scenario did not significantly change or mitigate the first-year impact. By contrast, the managed alignment scenario produced negligible negative impact in the modelling.

DB acknowledged that negotiations of this kind inevitably involve compromise, but he argued that the UK Government should enter negotiations with a clear understanding of the differential impacts of alternative implementation approaches. He expressed concern that public discussion had focused almost exclusively on headline economic benefits, without comparable scrutiny of sectoral risks.

Referring to the UK Government’s frequently cited figure of £5.1 billion economic benefit from an SPS deal, DB noted that no clear explanation had been provided as to how this figure had been calculated. It appeared to represent a gross figure and he questioned whether it included assumed savings from border checks that had not yet been fully implemented under existing arrangements. He suggested that any credible assessment must account for both benefits and costs to arrive at a net impact.

DB confirmed that regulatory standards governing PPPs remain substantively aligned between GB and the EU, as the UK assimilated EU law on exit. He explained that any post-Brexit divergence had arisen primarily from different regulatory decisions taken since exit and from differences in scheduling (for example, the EU’s renewal programme for older active substances, which has not been replicated in GB). He emphasised that there had been no lowering of scientific or safety

standards relative to the EU and suggested that, in some cases, the UK regulator had acted more cautiously.

DB concluded by reiterating that discarding GB decisions wholesale would be unnecessary and economically damaging, and that a managed, forward-looking alignment model would better protect growers while preserving regulatory integrity.

Dr Anthony Hopkins, Head of Policy, British Society of Plant Breeders (BSPB)

Speaking on behalf of the UK plant breeding and seeds sector, Anthony Hopkins (AH) opened by acknowledging the Andersons report commissioned by CropLife UK, which he described as “stark reading”.

AH observed that one of the main challenges facing the sector was ongoing uncertainty regarding the scope and content of the proposed SPS agreement. Engagement by Government officials with the plant breeding industry to date had been limited, with little discussion of potential trade-off impacts for the sector.

AH noted that plant breeders had been particularly affected by Brexit-related trade friction, pointing to practical examples of highly sensitive and valuable seed consignments being held at the border. He explained that such disruption and delays undermine confidence and can lead to companies cancelling shipments due to uncertainty over supply timelines, placing UK breeders and growers at a disadvantage.

He acknowledged that a SPS agreement could offer significant benefits if it genuinely removed unnecessary SPS checks and restored frictionless movement. However, he cautioned that the UK would remain a third country and expressed concern that some friction might persist, particularly for seeds.

In relation to prospects for UK innovation and regulatory flexibility, AH referred to work already undertaken on a new UK plant variety strategy, intended to streamline testing and approval processes and potentially realise efficiencies enabled by Brexit. This included the possibility of using commercial data and innovative testing approaches in variety listing. However, this work had effectively been paused due to uncertainty surrounding potential dynamic alignment with EU rules.

AH raised further concerns regarding precision breeding, noting that the UK has passed primary legislation enabling the commercial use of advanced breeding methods such as gene editing, and that secondary legislation for plants in England was recently implemented. However, he suggested that some companies may still be hesitant to invest in UK-based programmes due to uncertainty about whether the UK regime would remain distinct or subsequently align with EU rules. Noting recent progress at EU level towards the adoption of parallel regulations on New Genomic Techniques (NGTs), he urged early clarity over the nature and timetable for any prospective exemption from dynamic alignment for precision bred products.

Emphasising the importance of ensuring UK influence over future EU regulatory developments, AH warned that, as a third country, the UK was unlikely to enjoy the same degree of involvement as EU Member States. He cautioned that dynamic alignment without influence risked turning the UK into a rule-taker, particularly in areas such as evolving EU variety testing protocols, including new sustainability requirements.

In conclusion, AH urged UK negotiators to pursue mutual recognition wherever possible and ensure that prospective alignment with EU rules is managed in a way that safeguards UK competitiveness and attractiveness to investors.

Gail Soutar, Head of Trade and Business Strategy, NFU

Outlining the NFU's position, Gail Soutar (GS) noted that the NFU had initially advocated for an SPS agreement based on equivalence and mutual recognition rather than dynamic alignment. However, given the Government's stated approach, the NFU's focus was now on ensuring that the farming industry's priorities were properly reflected within a future trading framework with the EU.

GS emphasised that improved movement of agricultural goods presented significant economic opportunities for the UK. Farmers across all sectors had experienced reduced export volumes to the EU since Brexit as a result of increased certification costs and border friction. Beef exports were reportedly down by 16% and perishable, high-value goods such as dairy products faced particular issues if consignments were delayed at the border.

However, GS also highlighted a number of areas where regulatory divergence and implementation of an SPS agreement might present challenges. Precision breeding was as an obvious area of active divergence requiring clarity over future arrangements to ensure continued access to innovation for UK farmers and growers.

Mycotoxin standards also posed particular issues for the UK, with our maritime climate creating distinct risk profiles compared to some EU regions, while differences in animal disease management, including bTB vaccination strategies, also needed to be reflected in a final SPS agreement.

In practical terms, GS pointed to the need for transitional arrangements rather than hard-stop dynamic alignment to prevent UK farmers being disadvantaged relative to their EU counterparts. For example, EU organic farmers had been granted five years to adapt to the requirements of new EU organic regulations – would UK organic producers be treated equally?

GS stressed the critical importance of practical implementation on the ground. Crops are currently being grown in the UK using products not permitted in the EU, and with different MRLs. An abrupt switch to EU rules would inevitably create immediate compliance and economic challenges.

The NFU therefore supports staged implementation of an SPS agreement that respects existing GB decisions and authorisations until corresponding EU decisions are reached.

Despite regular engagement with Defra officials and ministers on the SPS negotiations, the NFU remained concerned about the possibility of an agreement being concluded rapidly for political reasons, without fully resolving sectoral trade-offs. She emphasised that the worst outcome for UK farmers would be a "bad deal quickly" that cannot subsequently be revisited.

Questions & discussion

The following key issues arose during questions and discussion:

The opportunity to frame the SPS issue within the broader context of the UK's ambition to become a global science and technology leader, not confining the debate to the immediate economics of British farming, but also considering the UK's globally leading position in agri-tech, clean tech and life sciences. As with the Precision Breeding Act, could the UK envisage a role as an agile innovator, trialling and deploying next-generation crops and technologies ahead of the EU, thereby creating a "runway" into the European market?

The urgent need to engage with Baroness Batters' recently published *Farming Profitability Review* in terms of the potential economic impacts for UK agriculture of a future SPS agreement.

In relation to precision breeding, discussion also focused on the anticipated (~two-year) timeline for parallel NGT regulations to be adopted and implemented by the EU, and the potential for

regulatory alignment to help address the current practicalities of managing different regulatory regimes across the UK nations.

Concluding the meeting, CD thanked all guest speakers and attendees. He reiterated that while an SPS agreement may offer opportunities for improved trade with the EU, regulatory alignment may pose significant risks to UK agriculture and access to innovation, depending on the implementation model adopted. He added that parliamentary scrutiny of the issue would continue, and emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Government fully understands and takes account of both the benefits and the trade-offs of any proposed UK-EU SPS agreement.