

10 July 2020

Dear Secretary of State for International Trade,

Friends of the Earth has raised deep concerns about proceeding with trade negotiations with the US during the current COVID-19 pandemic alongside many civil society organisations as part of the Trade Justice Movement. However, *over the past two months, the UK has indeed embarked on such negotiations**. We are contacting you to reiterate our opposition to any resumption in discussions in the short or medium term, and to ask to you provide businesses, civil society and MPs with certainty and security by *calling a halt to trade talks*, and ruling out such talks until the situation is not simply clearer, but until negotiations can receive the scrutiny and attention they deserve from wider society.

Parts of the UK and US are in lockdown, the public, media and Parliament are rightly focused on the pandemic, and the long-term situation is still very unclear. Hence it would be deeply inappropriate for trade negotiations with the US to commence at this time – or for the foreseeable future. The UK government's attention should be focused on dealing with the public health and economic crises which face our nation.

We have multiple concerns about a trade agreement with the US – particularly in relation to food standards, animal welfare protections, and chemical and pesticide safeguards. The current crisis has highlighted the vital need to maintain the highest possible standards in these areas, yet the US's recent Trade Barriers report has underlined a desire to limit application of the precautionary principle, cut food, plant and animal health checks at borders, and promote the levelling down of standards to the lowest common denominator levels in trade with European nations. The US has also refused to reference the climate crisis or joint action on climate change as part of recent trade deals.

Even without directly attacking UK environmental and health protections, an agreement which promotes adoption of a US approach to regulation and allows imports of US goods produced to lower standards will undermine UK public health and environment protection and limit our climate ambition. With concerns around food security higher than ever, long-term and irreversible decisions must be made carefully, as part of a holistic trade strategy which puts our environment, health and wellbeing first.

These are high risk issues that need considered public debate and democratic scrutiny, but this debate cannot happen amidst national lockdown, with Parliament not fully functioning and with Whitehall officials focused on the pandemic. When we're out of the current health crisis, and when the government has the time and resources to dedicate to negotiations, we expect full public and Parliamentary engagement with appropriate scrutiny and transparency throughout the process.

We urge you, therefore, to publicly call a formal halt to all trade negotiations and make a commitment that talks will not resume until the bulk of the COVID-19 crisis has passed.

Yours,



Miriam Turner and Hugh Knowles,
Joint CEO
Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland

* Letter launched April 24 2020. Lines in italics amended 02/07 to note current progress of negotiations.