UK-Australia trade deal sparks concerns

By Josh Loeb

THE BVA, RSPCA and others have urged the government not to compromise on animal welfare standards in pursuit of a free-trade agreement (FTA) with Australia.

The UK has reportedly offered terms to Australia under which both countries would phase out tariffs on each other’s goods over the course of a 15-year transition period. It is understood a deal could be struck as early as mid-June.

A UK-Australia deal would represent the first major post-Brexit trade deal for the UK – but British farming groups have warned they could be undercut by potentially limitless volumes of agricultural products produced more cheaply in Australia being imported into the UK.

The BVA says animal welfare standards ‘currently diverge significantly between the UK and Australia’.

It has noted that the Animal Protection Index – an index created by World Animal Protection that ranks 50 countries worldwide according to their legislation and policy commitments to protecting animals – gives the UK a B grade, whereas Australia holds a D grade.

BVA president James Russell said that removing trade barriers ‘needs to go hand in hand with protecting the UK’s hard-won reputation for high welfare standards and preserving the livelihoods of our farming communities’.

He added: ‘Opening the floodgates to cheaper imports in the interests of sealing a deal would spell bad news for animal welfare and undercut our producers, who pride themselves on high standards and offering UK customers the quality that they both deserve and expect.’

Neil Hudson, a Conservative MP and the only vet in the House of Commons, urged caution and patience over any FTA and said parliamentarians must be allowed to scrutinise it before it is signed.

He said the Australian FTA ‘looks to be close to being signed, to coincide with the G7 in June, to which Australia has been invited.

‘We were promised that parliament would be able to scrutinise these FTAs and this should be for all members and for the relevant specialist select committees [to be able to do so]. This scrutiny should be meaningful, including the ability to amend or even block FTAs rather than merely delay them.’

Hudson also voiced concern about the fact that the new statutory Trade and Agriculture Commission – intended to advise on and inform the government’s trade policies – had not yet been set up so was not in a position to scrutinise the Australian FTA.

Neil Parish, chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, has written to the international trade secretary, Liz Truss, calling for any agreement in principle with Australia to be published as soon as it is signed off.

Use of dogs to screen for Covid-19 promising

PEOPLE with Covid-19 have a distinct odour that can be detected by trained dogs with a high degree of accuracy, new research has found.

The results suggest that dogs could be used at ports of entry to identify Covid-19-positive people in a rapid and non-invasive way before they enter a country.

The study, from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, charity Medical Detection Dogs and Durham University, found that specially trained dogs were able to detect Covid-19 with up to 94.3 per cent sensitivity and up to 92 per cent specificity. They were able to detect people who were asymptomatic for the infection, those with both high and low viral loads and also detect Covid-19 variants.

Biodetection dogs are trained to detect volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which are released in body odour and known to change during respiratory infections. Chemical analysis of the VOCs associated with Covid-19 infection showed a clear distinction between infected and uninfected individuals.

In this study, dogs were trained for six weeks, after which they were able to distinguish between odour samples of 200 infected participants and 200 uninfected participants. Face masks, socks and T-shirts from members of the public were used as the samples, from which the VOCs were collected.

Through modelling, the researchers believe that two dogs could screen 300 plane passengers in 30 minutes as part of a ‘rapid screen and test’ strategy. It is suggested that only people identified by the biodetection dogs would need to have a PCR test to confirm infection. The researchers say the use of dogs and PCR tests is estimated to detect more than twice as many cases than testing symptomatic individuals alone.

The study has been released ahead of formal publication and is not yet peer reviewed. The researchers hope to move to a second phase of research soon, using the dogs in real settings.