# Uncertainty deepens as UK delays clarity on Plant Health checks ahead of July deadline



# Uncertainty Grows as UK Faces New Plant Health Checks

The UK's fresh produce sector is plunged into uncertainty as the implementation of Medium Risk A & B plant health checks looms ever closer, with the 1 July rollout just weeks away. A recent parliamentary session on 6 May saw Baroness Hayman, representing the newly installed Labour government, dismiss critical inquiries regarding these regulations, leaving industry leaders frustrated and devoid of the clarity they desperately need.

The Fresh Produce Consortium (FPC) has vocally expressed its alarm over this ongoing confusion, asserting that the lack of clarity could lead to a catastrophic disruption of supply chains for fruits, vegetables, and cut flowers. Chief Executive Nigel Jenney's dissatisfaction is palpable: “None of these questions are new… Time is running out, and the industry cannot afford further ambiguity.” His remarks capture the anxiety prevalent among stakeholders who feel their operational stability is at risk due to the absence of decisive directives.

Compounding these frustrations, the EFRA Committee peppered the government with pressing questions during the session, particularly regarding the confirmation of the 1 July deadline. The government’s failure to offer a definitive assurance regarding the end of easements for Medium Risk A & B produce is hampering essential planning processes within the industry. Stakeholders are also raising alarms about the readiness of Border Control Posts (BCPs) like Sevington, questioning their infrastructure and staffing capabilities. Until now, the government has offered scant reassurances on these critical points.

As the fresh produce sector prepares for these unwelcome changes, the necessity for around-the-clock inspection availability has been emphasized. This measure is vital for maintaining time-sensitive supply chains, yet the new government has shown a disturbing reluctance to commit to such provisions. Moreover, the Authorised Operator Status Scheme, designed to simplify processes for compliant importers, remains shrouded in uncertainty, leaving industry representatives in the dark about its launch.

This climate of confusion mirrors broader concerns regarding the operational readiness of both UK and EU plant health systems. With new checks on 'medium risk' plant products already beginning on 30 April 2024, importers have cautioned that the lack of a clear roadmap could severely disrupt trade flows. The anticipated costs associated with these checks threaten to impose an annual burden of £330 million on the industry, raising fears of skyrocketing food prices that could reverberate throughout the supply chain.

Additionally, new trade critiques have emerged concerning the imposition of a 'common user charge' by the UK government, which could soar to £145 per consignment. These fees, ostensibly aimed at bolstering border operations and biosecurity, have sparked alarm among smaller importers who worry that exorbitant costs will deter EU exporters, ultimately restricting consumer choices.

Crucially, industry representatives are demanding immediate, high-level engagement with the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) in order to carve out a clear path forward and stave off potential chaos at the border. Without such crucial dialogue, stakeholders presage severe adverse effects, including delays, shortages, and a diminished standing for the UK as a leader in the fresh produce market.

As discussions progress, the FPC insists that the government must recognize and respond to the urgent needs of the sector. The stakes couldn’t be higher; the future viability of Britain’s fresh produce supply chain hangs in the balance under this untested Labour administration.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/britain-starts-physical-checks-fresh-food-imports-eu-2024-04-30/> - On April 30, 2024, Britain initiated physical checks on fresh food imports from the EU, marking a significant step in its post-Brexit border control measures. While major supermarkets and larger exporting businesses prepared for the new demands, smaller retailers and wholesalers warned of potential delays, disruption, and higher prices. The second phase of Britain’s Border Target Operating Model involves physical checks on 'medium risk' animal and plant products, introducing new charges and inspections to prevent diseases and pests, leveling the playing field for UK exporters. Despite previous delays, the UK government insists on the necessity of these checks for biosecurity, although they face criticism from industry leaders regarding operational inefficiencies and increased costs. The government estimates these checks could collectively cost importers £330 million annually and minimally affect food inflation.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/38498a3b-ef3c-451e-80fc-84d2bb4b7302> - Trade groups have criticized the UK government's decision to impose a 'common user charge' of up to £145 on consignments of EU plant and animal products imported into Britain, starting from April 30. Businesses, concerned that these charges would elevate food prices and deter EU exporters, stated that the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ignored industry input. The British Chambers of Commerce expressed worries that the charges would heavily impact smaller importers. The fees will be £29 per high- and medium-risk product line, capped at £145 per consignment. Despite port industry's relative acceptance of the charge, other trade bodies highlighted potential negative effects on food prices, consumer choice, and inflated costs for small businesses. The UK government maintained that the charges were necessary to cover border operation costs and ensure biosecurity.
4. <https://hortnews.com/new-border-control-plan-streamlines-plant-health-checks/> - Importers and exporters of plants and fresh produce are being asked for their views on the government’s new draft regime for importing goods into the UK. The Border Target Operating Model (TOM) was published in April after the government decided a year ago not to introduce the final set of controls on EU imports that had been planned. It continues the phasing-in of biosecurity controls on the import of plants and plant products while reducing the number of identity and physical checks some need. It proposes a new approach to security controls applying to all imports and the phytosanitary controls applying to imports of plants and plant products, which will be facilitated by a single digital gateway for both importers and exporters, the UK Single Trade Window. Regulated plants and plant products will now be categorised as high, medium or low risk. High risk includes all plants for planting and potatoes; medium risk covers plant products with an identified pest or disease risk; low risk includes fresh produce which carries no identified pest or disease risk to Britain. Controls will then be applied depending on risk category. “There will be plants and plant products which undergo fewer inspections or are not regulated at all,” says Defra. Certain goods will remain prohibited entirely. The first deadline for the implementation of TOM is October 31 this year, when all imports of medium risk plants and plant products will need a phytosanitary certificate on entry. From January next year, low risk goods will be exempt from systematic controls at the border and so will not require a phytosanitary certificate or pre-notification. This includes most fruit, vegetables and cut flowers. Instead, they will be subject to enhanced monitoring via surveillance and evidence-led visits to premises by plant health inspectors. By the same date medium risk plants and plant products from the EU will need documentary, physical and identity checks at the border while high risk plants and plant products must come through a border control post or control point where identity and physical checks will be carried out.
5. <https://freshproduce.org.uk/advice/medium-risk-fruit-vegetables-eu-and-row-finalised> - After a scientific review of commodities across all plant and plant product risk categories, the UK government is pleased to announce that there has been an increase in plants and plant products that have become deregulated, therefore able to move into GB without being subject to any plant health controls. Commodities in the low-risk category for non-EU countries will no longer need a PC. This now harmonies the EU and non-EU controls. All low-risk goods are now considered deregulated. The deregulation of these products has a predicted reduction of around 800,000 PCs, estimating a £105m saving to industry. This figure is based on the average UK cost of a PC. Medium-risk plants and plant products: new sub-categories Initially, plants and plant products were categorised into ‘high, medium and low’ risk and controls have been appropriately weighted against the risk. After further review, there will be a change to how the medium-risk category will look for plants and plant products. The medium-risk category will be split into two parts, A and B. Therefore, the new risk-categories will be: High, Medium A, Medium B and Low-risk. High risk goods require a Phytosanitary Certificate (PC) and pre-notification before entering GB. Since 30 April 2024, in line with the phased import regime, these goods are subject to risk-based, physical and identity checks at a Border Control Post (BCP) or designated Control Point (CP). Medium-risk A goods require a PC and pre-notification before entering GB. From 30 April 2024, in line with the phased import regime, these goods are subject to risk-based, physical and identity checks at a BCP or designated CP. Medium-risk B goods only require a PC when entering GB. Low risk goods do not require a PC or pre-notification. Further to the risk category changes, three commodities, parts of plants (other than fruits and seeds) of Ipomoea and Solanaceae and leaves of Spinacia oleracea (spinach leaves) have moved from the low-risk category to medium-risk for imports from EU and non-EU countries.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/154a187a-4b35-483d-900e-5bc85894df4a> - UK importers are warning that the country isn't prepared for new post-Brexit border controls set to begin on April 30, 2024. The £22mn border facility at Harwich is operational, but critical operational details are still missing, causing significant concern within the food and plant industries. The Horticultural Trades Association and Cold Chain Federation have voiced concerns about the lack of clarity on inspection processes, waiting times, and overall readiness of border control posts. They argue that these unresolved issues will lead to increased food prices, wastage, and logistical challenges. Industry representatives are calling for mitigation measures, such as extending current inspection systems and delaying physical inspections to allow more time for preparation. The new checks aim to improve the UK's biosecurity and level the playing field for UK and EU businesses, but there are fears of substantial disruption to trade flows.