

The Cost of Cheap Imported Animal Products

Agroecological Livestock Farmers'
Perspectives on Animal Welfare,
International Meat Trade, and Sustainable
Farming Futures in Britain



Introduction

“The government values the excellent work of the British farming industry in producing the highest quality food that feeds our country. We are rightly proud of the high animal welfare standards we have in this country; and [they] are greatly valued by consumers both at home and abroad ... but the government is clear that there is more to do” (DEFRA, 2025).

The above is from the Labour Government’s New Animal Welfare (AW) Strategy for England. Its commitments include phasing out enriched cages for laying hens, the culling of day-old male chicks, individual dairy calf isolation, and farrowing crates, routine castration, and CO₂ gas stunning for pigs. These ambitions reflect the UK’s historic inclination towards animal protection and advocacy: the 1822 Martin’s Act addressing the cruel treatment of cows, the RSPCA’s establishment in 1824, the first Vegetarian and Vegan Societies, early pioneers in AW science, literary critiques of factory farming (Harrison, 1964), and the first governmental advisory bodies dedicated to AW on farms (McCulloch, 2019). Despite the new strategy’s ambitions, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 remains the legally-binding baseline. Significant shifts in policy, markets, and farming systems since then highlight a critical need to rethink and strengthen AW on farms. This process should consider the knowledge and experiences of farmers and consumers as well as scientists, and far greater corporate accountability (Evans & Miele, 2019).

In a globally connected food system, improving AW on farms is an international challenge. Many animal products sold in the UK are imported, and “84 out of 88 countries that have/are negotiating tariff-free access to UK markets for animal products have [AW] standards below those required by

British law” (API, CIWF, RSPCA, 2025, p. 12). As higher AW regulations often increase the costs of farming (Ferguson et al., 2025; Grethe, 2017), livestock farmers in Britain can be undercut and drawn to intensify their farms to remain competitive in mainstream food markets. This dynamic fractures Britain’s reputation and commitment to animal protection and sustainable food (Fiut & Urbaniak, 2016), with multiple organisations advocating for a restriction or ban on imports that do not meet British AW standards (API, CIWF, RSPCA, 2025). One survey found that 92% of livestock farmers would back government policies to achieve this (Bryant Research, 2025). Nonetheless, cheap imported animal products remain widely available to consumers in Britain, which is particularly complex given the cost-of-living crisis, and the challenge of not only feeding the nation, but doing so well, in ways that don’t cost communities, the environment, and the quality of animals’ lives.

This study responds to the National Food Strategy’s call for farmer-led agricultural transitions (Dimbleby, 2021), exploring how six agroecological livestock farmers in Britain perceive the impacts of cheap imported animal products through semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis of interviews identified four key themes in farmers’ experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies around cheap imported animal products: (1) animal care and environmental stewardship are central to farming identities; (2) there are both limitations and opportunities in market-based AW governance; (3) relocalising food systems is key to countering the hidden costs of industrial supply chains; and (4) broader political and cultural change is essential for higher AW and sustainable food systems.

Methods

Data Collection

Secondary data consist of supporting literature across the Introduction and Discussion sections, drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals and policy and third-sector food, farming, and animal protection reports. This provides context of trade pressures, AW regulation, farming livelihoods, and sustainable food system transitions.

Primary data consist of six semi-structured interviews with livestock farmers in Britain, conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and lasting 35–60 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then deleted for confidentiality. Interview questions can be found in Appendix A. The participants identify as follows:

Farmer 1: Agroecological/Regenerative Beef and Sheep Farmer

Farmer 2: Mixed Farmer

Farmer 3: Livestock Farm Owner/Land Manager

Farmer 4: Mixed Farmer

Farmer 5: Unspecified

Farmer 6: Unspecified

Recruitment and Sampling

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling through the Vegans Support the Farmers (VSF, 2025) network and at the Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC) 2026. They were required to be over 18, actively

involved in livestock farming in Britain, and able to provide informed consent. No financial incentives were offered.

Given the prominence of agroecology at the ORFC, the participants primarily represent this community. Also due to the small sample size, the study's generalisability to broader livestock farming communities in Britain is limited. However, participating farmers spoke to the broader experiences and challenges of livestock farming in Britain, and nonetheless offered valuable insights into the tensions and possibilities of alternative sustainable farming approaches. Future research could prioritise interviews with 'conventional'/non-agroecological livestock farmers as well as focus groups where participants represent a diversity of farming backgrounds to facilitate cross-community/peer dialogue and problem-solving.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, involving "(1) dataset familiarisation; (2) data coding; (3) initial theme generation; (4) theme development and review; (5) theme refining, defining and naming; and (6) writing up" (p. 6). The analysis was inductive (grounded in and driven by participants' own accounts) and recognises that the researcher's perspectives and experiences inevitably shaped the interpretation of the data and generation of themes (Marshall, 2026). Codes first captured recurring ideas across participants, and these were iteratively clustered into themes reflecting broader meaningful narratives. In selecting quotations for themes, priority was given to those encapsulating patterns across and between participants. A provisional draft of the analysis was shared with each participant for feedback to ensure the

accuracy, authenticity, and representativeness of selected themes and quotations.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethics approval through the University of Exeter's ANTM103 Module Convenors. Each participant provided written informed consent before their interview, and again verbally at the start of their interview. They were made aware of their ability to skip questions and withdraw at any point without consequence. Data was pseudo-anonymised, securely stored on university-owned SharePoint, and deleted after analysis. No significant risks to participant wellbeing were identified during the research (Marshall, 2025). Participants retained full control over whether (and how) quotations and findings were used in broader research outputs, facilitated by a project letter between the researcher, external collaborator (VSF), and the University of Exeter Educational Contracts team.

Findings

Theme 1: Animal care and environmental stewardship are central to farming identities

Across all interviews, there was a clear expression that livestock farming is not just about money. It is a vocation grounded in knowledge and care for animals and the land. Farmers expressed pride not only in the care of animals on their farms, but also in Britain's world-leading AW standards. At the same time, farmers acknowledged significant room for improvement, as British livestock farmers face increasing market pressure to intensify. Several farmers highlighted the responsibility and satisfaction they feel in providing high-quality and sustainable food while maintaining the health and resilience of ecosystems, which they saw as naturally coinciding with giving animals a good life on the farm.

Animal welfare to me is utmost. It's a priority above everything else ... if you're not giving your livestock the best life possible, then your heart isn't in it, really (Farmer 2).

I was born into this job, and I do it because I feel a responsibility towards it ... a kind of stewardship is how I see it. [And the livestock] are performing a service for the land, too (Farmer 3).

[Animal welfare is not about] de-beaking or cutting this or trimming that or, square metres of housing space ... [it's about] seeing them as sentient

beings. At the root of it is considering the animals' overall holistic health and wellbeing (Farmer 1).

But a lot of people ask me: "How can I send my animals to slaughter? How do I cope?" I have the knowledge that I've given that animal the best life it could possibly have had ... We're always there to care for them ... and I take solace from that (Farmer 4).

Theme 2: There are both limitations and opportunities in market-based AW governance

Many farmers acknowledged that consumer demand for cheaper food is justified in, and intensified by, the current cost-of-living crisis, as well as the fact that these pressures affect farmers who must maintain viable livelihoods under increasingly tight margins. Several farmers suggested that global, industrial food supply chains, prioritising high volumes of food at low cost, allow Britain to shift the true costs of cheap food to other countries, creating pressures that affect farmers, animals, and ecosystems in international and unequal ways. They discussed how trade agreements frequently reinforce price competitiveness rather than sustainability, public health, or AW.

All farmers interviewed pointed to the need for greater corporate accountability in how food is sourced, priced, and labelled, because supermarkets are responsible for championing cheapness, obscuring the true cost of food, and creating pressure on farmers to intensify. Market pressures were also seen to manifest in animal bodies, where breeds are chosen primarily for convenience and maximising output rather than

suitability to the land or quality of life. In light of these, the following market solutions were identified: (1) more accessible and ambitious AW certification schemes and fairer prices for farmers committing to them; (2) clear and mandatory AW labelling on animal products to increase consumer awareness of different farming standards; and (3) greater retail responsibility for absorbing costs to make higher-welfare animal products more accessible.

People have this disconnect, and they believe everything should be cheap ... I don't know whether the customers expect it or whether, actually, the supermarkets say [or make] the customers expect it (Farmer 5).

It's important that we don't judge people's consumption where it's to do with economic means ... I think that's really problematic. We want people to be able to make ethical consumption choices regardless of their income ... [But generally, perhaps] we need to eat a lot less meat and be prepared to pay for it when we do (Farmer 3).

Chicken is one of those things where, really, we should probably be looking deeper into our souls about how chicken is made and sorting that industry out, changing the breeds ... [Regarding the meat industry as a whole] ... If a supermarket wants to grade welfare standards, it just puts greater requirements on the supply chain. And then it uses it as a marketing tool to say "this supermarket has implemented the [example] animal welfare standard, which goes above and beyond the legal requirements" (Farmer 4).

Businesses that have world-class products aren't normally scraping the barrel or relying on government subsidies. I think a good incentive [for higher national AW standards] would be for better ... more transparent food labeling ... We do everything to the highest standards and then go into supermarkets where it's not clearly communicated. I don't think a small British flag says enough to reflect the vast differences in welfare (Farmer 2).

Theme 3: Relocalising food systems is key to countering the hidden costs of industrial supply chains

In response to the limitations outlined in Theme 2, shorter, relocalised supply chains (i.e., direct farm sales and farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and farm branding as storytelling) were understood as both economic and ethical solutions. These were described to support higher AW in farming by (1) protecting farmers from the extraction of profits by intermediaries; (2) providing an alternative to the productivist paradigm that rewards intensification; and (3) re-embedding food systems within communities by fostering a greater sense of responsibility for, and connection with, animals, nature, and farms.

If it's sourced in Britain, we can have more control over welfare, pollution, and the environmental impact of what we do. If we outsource [meat production], we can export our bad habits ... Ask where your food is coming from. Ask robust questions. Investigate it. And I know it gets overpowering, but food is important ... What happens to those animals? What about the

workers? Are they getting a decent wage? What about the soil? ... Investigate how your food is produced (Farmer 1).

We have no idea of the true cost of our cheap meat on everything, on our health, on the health of the planet, on the farmers. If the trade deal was with a country that had completely banned farrowing crates, it might raise the bar rather than lower it. [But] ... I just don't know how some of the more extreme [industrial] livestock enterprises are going to be viable ... if you look at the Met Office report for 2050 and the temperatures they talk about ... we're going to have to change our diets [as a nation], and where we're currently importing [cheap meat] from, it's going to get even hotter (Farmer 6).

Buy direct from the farm ... and then the farm ends up with a fairer share of the market ... and you can have that relationship [between communities and farms] (Farmer 5).

Quality produce is [mostly] sold through private, non-agricultural companies, whereas we should be creating cooperative structures in beef and lamb, where we retain control of the product through to the end consumer. I think farmers need to do more in terms of taking ownership of our product, branding it, and bringing it to market ourselves, or working with companies that have stronger community links. There's so much potential in brands because every farm has a story (Farmer 2).

Theme 4: Broader political and cultural change is essential for higher AW and sustainable food systems

Farmers frequently described how post-war Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) incentives, such as increasing farm size, higher stocking densities, and generally maximising yields, aligned with ‘productivist’ values seen as necessary to feed the nation during periods of hardship and rebuilding. While this paradigm remains dominant as ‘conventional’ farming, several farmers suggested it may be becoming increasingly obsolete in the face of ecological breakdown and growing social concerns around food and farming ethics. Some farmers suggested this productivist mindset constrains innovation and maintains the dominance of intensive, output-focused farming, which impacts people, animals, and the environment internationally and detrimentally.

Some farmers discussed England’s Agricultural Transition Plan (2021–2028) as a turning point or new era in farming, with both limitations and opportunities in the shift away from direct payments and towards public money for public goods. While not currently a reliable system for all farmers, the transition demonstrates an opening towards higher AW and sustainable agriculture. Agroecological practices, such as lower stocking densities, land-adapted/heritage livestock breeds, diversified and mixed systems, and reduced reliance on external inputs, were viewed as important for AW and long-term farming resilience.

However, responsibility extends far beyond the farm gate. Farmers emphasised that national regulations should ensure imported animal products meet domestic AW standards to ‘level the playing field’, and that

there is significantly underutilised potential in public procurement (i.e., school and hospital food) to prioritise agroecological produce. Overall, scaling these systems and supporting farmers to do so requires more supportive policies, reliable agri-environmental schemes, and market conditions that favour higher AW and sustainable farming.

The government paid [farmers] to take out the trees and hedges ... under the pretence of feeding a nation that was struggling after the war. So they did the right thing. And now everyone's like, "You shouldn't have done this". [Farmers] want to do the right thing, but maybe they don't quite know what the right thing is. They're not really being provided with that support ... [Imagine] you've got all your infrastructure, you've got all your [livestock breed] genetics, your dairy contract is based on yielding a certain amount of milk, [and] your loan is based on your dairy contract. Even if you're thinking, "I might want to make a change here", you're trapped (Farmer 6).

Livestock farming is at a pivotal point, which is why you're seeing a lot of diversification on farm, driven by uncertainty around subsidies. Farms are looking for alternative income streams, but fundamentally, they are there to produce food, and there's only a certain number of holiday lets or glamping sites a community can sustain. Environmental schemes on their own aren't yet sufficient, and what farmers need is clearer direction and coordination from government (Farmer 2).

[Resilience] means being able to produce food, and that production needs to be low-input crops-wise and high-welfare livestock-wise ... You've got to have good soil health, and you've got to have a mixed business ... [Further,

the government should] ensure that any imports meet UK requirements. If you buy a car or a kettle, it has to meet UK requirements. You're not allowed to bring a kettle into the UK that doesn't meet those standards. So why should it be different with food? (Farmer 5).

By not many measures is agriculture working. In terms of farm incomes, pollution, biodiversity [loss]. It's broken ... I've been much more interested in undoing some of the bad work that I did and was funded to do. And I decided to do it. I don't blame anybody else for doing it other than myself. Everyone, every farm, is different, every farm is unique, but we have to find a kind of template that works for restoring nature ... I think what I've learned is about the web of nature and how our actions can have completely unpredictable consequences ... I want my legacy to be something that begins to restore that (Farmer 1).

Discussion & Recommendations

Farmers in Britain are navigating numerous responsibilities, pushes, and pulls from (1) past CAP policies and mainstream markets promoting intensification; (2) devolved nation policies emphasising improved AW and environmental outcomes; (3) climate and animal advocacy/pressure groups; and (4) the expanding role of the farmer encompassing businessperson, land manager, vet, administrator, and more (McLoughlin, 2024). As Sutherland & Darnhofer (2012) argue, farming practices evolve in response to shifting 'rules of the game'. Therefore, a Just Transition in British farming includes, but must also go beyond, farmer and consumer choices, extending

consideration to market structures, national policies, and international trade, labour, and food systems (McLaughlin & Weiler, 2017; Morrison, 2024; ResPublica, 2022).

Even though the place of animals (and their welfare) in agriculture is contested and polarising (Offor, 2020), cheap imported animal products represent a space where overlapping visions of sustainable land use, animal lives, and farmer livelihoods can create common ground across diverse communities (both physical and ideological) for food system transformation (Abson et al., 2017). For example, local food networks can be strengthened by engaging farmers, researchers, charities, and the public within them. Bridging communities through such networks can foster direct participation in food systems (e.g., knowledge exchange and applied research, cooperative food education and distribution, public advocacy, and campaigning) to counter the distancing effects of industrial agriculture, hold corporations more accountable, and drive policy change to ‘raise the bar’ for the treatment of animals in food systems (Offor, 2020; Adams, 2024).

Collaborative and multi-level approaches will likely be necessary to catalyse cultural, economic, and policy shifts towards more plant-rich diets (sourced primarily from agroecological farming) and reduce livestock and animal product consumption (Dimbleby, 2021; English & Tobi, 2025). Through symbiotic bottom-up and top-down action, such ‘translocal’ organising (Gordon et al., 2022) offers a pathway to ‘degrow’ industrial agriculture, scale out more socially and environmentally sustainable alternatives (Tilzey, 2024), and embed plural experiences (human and nonhuman) into food system governance.

Conclusion

This study explored cheap imported animal products from the primary perspective of six agroecological livestock farmers in Britain, revealing a fundamental contradiction within the national food system: a strong commitment to high AW alongside market and policy conditions that profoundly undermine it. Farmers emphasised the need for clearer, more directed, and ambitious national agricultural policy, alongside markets that encourage nature-friendly farming, plant-rich diets, and farm diversification along this trajectory, positioning such shifts as essential for improving animals' lives in food systems.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Participants

About the Farmer

1. Could you tell me about your farm: location, size, and what kind of animals you keep?
2. What generation farmer are you?/ How did you get into farming?

Work and Future

3. What do you enjoy most about it?
4. What do you find most challenging about it?
5. How do you feel about the future of your farm, and the way things are going in livestock farming in this country?

Animal Welfare

6. What does “good animal welfare” mean to you, in your own words and experience?
7. What do you think about British animal welfare standards?

Trade and Imports

8. Are you affected by animal products that come into the UK from other countries?
9. If future trade deals continue to allow lower-welfare animal product imports, how do you think that would affect you or other farmers?

Farm diversification and adaptation

10. Have you made any changes to how you farm in response to market or policy pressures in recent years?
11. When you think about adapting your farm for the future, if money or

policy were not an issue, what would you want to do with your land or your farm?

Support

12. Do you feel your views and experiences, and livestock farmers' views and experiences, are heard or understood by the government and the public?
13. If the UK wants to keep improving animal welfare nationally, what would need to happen to make that achievable for farmers?
14. If you could give one message directly to the public in relation to this issue, what would it be? How can the public support farmers to maintain and improve animal welfare standards in farming?
15. If you could give one message directly to decision-makers and policy-makers in relation to this issue, what would it be? How can policy better support farmers to maintain and improve animal welfare standards in farming?