



Public Health
England

Imported food testing and the impact of EU Exit

Caroline Willis – May 2021



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FW&E Microbiology Service

Food, Water and Environmental (FW&E) Microbiology Services are specialist laboratories managed by Public Health England. They operate from three sites in England and work with Local Authorities and Port Health Authorities to protect the public from microbiological threats posed by contaminated food, water and the environment.





Impacts of EU Exit on FW&E Labs

Delays to deliveries – equipment, media, QC materials

Training and EURL participation

Customers requiring advice on testing of products for export

Changes to workload –

- increased testing of imported foods from EU

- shellfish can't be sold to EU if Class B ; alternative shellfish types being sent for testing

- testing of products for export?



Current imported food involvement

Regular liaison with Port Health Authorities – local and national

Provision of courier service, microbiological testing and interpretation of results

Provision of advice on corrective measures where results are poor

Provision of Witness Statements for legal proceedings

Coordination of surveys to assess the risks of imported and non-imported foods

Provision of training on sampling technique and other areas of microbiology

Monthly liaison with Food Standards Agency to provide updates on imported food issues



Management of EU imports

Pre-Brexit, imported food = products from third countries

Imported foods checked at Border Inspection Post, then move freely throughout Europe

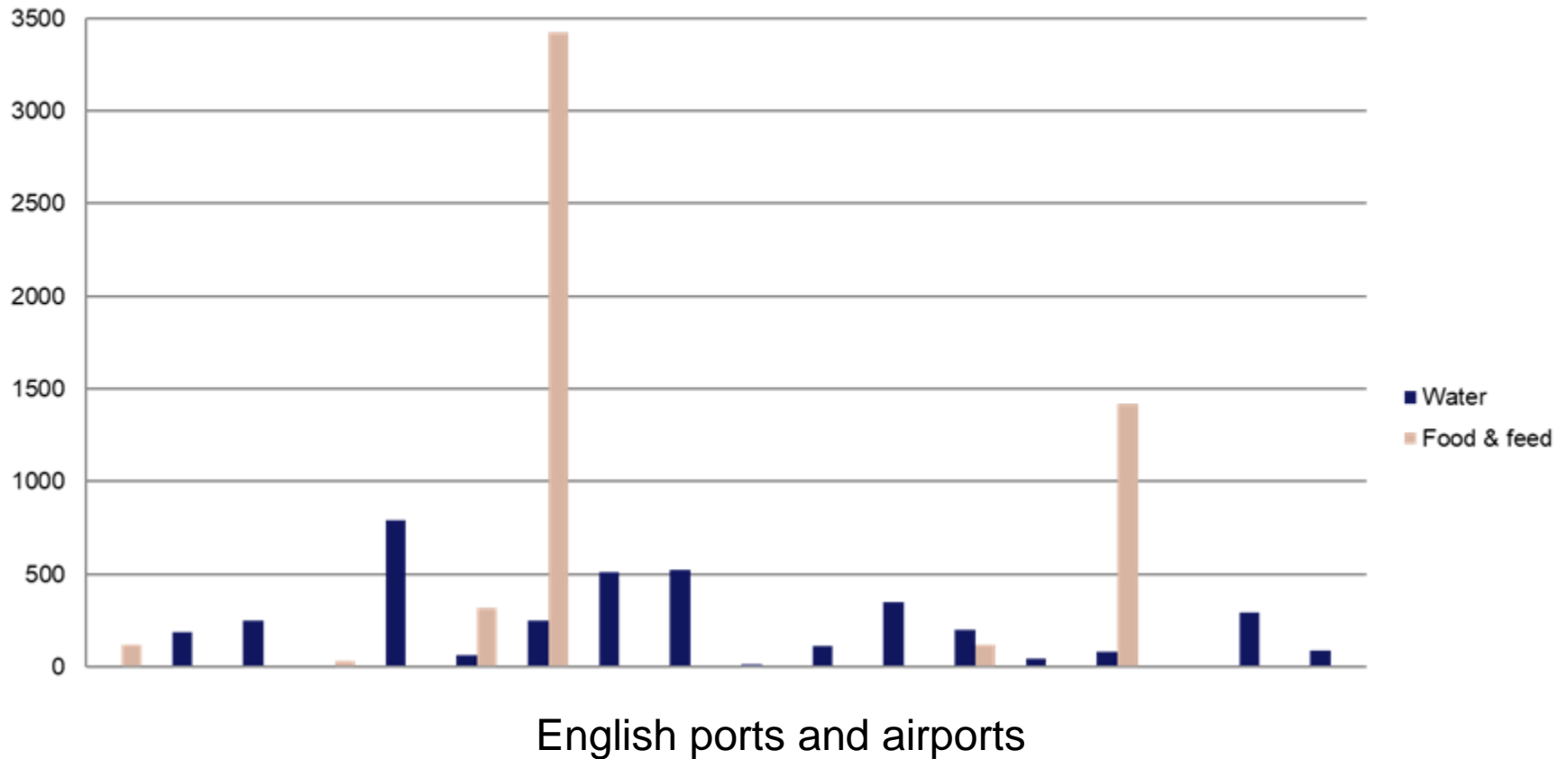
Shared information on tests, results and issues via 'Traces'

Products from EU have not been checked at UK borders



Review of sample numbers

Imported food/feed and ships water sample numbers 2018





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No checks on food safety under Brexit plan

- » Controls on imports could be suspended if UK cannot reach deal with EU
- » Officials worry that perishable goods would be delayed at borders
- » Food would be waved through to avoid huge tailbacks on motorways
- » Brexit Secretary refuses to deny that Britain is stockpiling food

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Monitoring of EU foods

Physical checks on EU imports due to start January 2022

Small proportion of all samples arriving (1% for specified product types)

Increase in sample numbers for labs that have historically worked with ports

New involvement in imported food / Port Health testing for labs that have not previously done this

Liaison with Local Authorities regarding set-up of new Border Control Points

- sampling training, courier arrangements, costs of testing, environmental monitoring requirements



Peculiarities of Port Health testing

- Often short notice of sampling / collection requirements (ships only in port for short period of time)
- Manuscripts reviewed by Port Health while ships are at sea, to determine what will need checking on arrival
- Samples may be detained – rapid turnaround times required
- Where samples are unsatisfactory, it can be difficult to re-visit or investigate further (no visit to producer to assess HACCP!)
- If problems are found, food can be destroyed before it reaches the consumer – proactively protecting public health





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Sampling error in end-product testing

No. samples tested per batch	True level of contamination in batch	Probability of accepting batch
5	1%	95%
5	5%	78%
5	10%	59%
10	1%	90%
10	5%	60%
10	10%	35%



Monitoring of imported foods

PHE has been collecting data on imported foods including routine checks and through surveys

Important to continue to monitor trends

- both EU and non-EU imported foods
- look for any decline in quality over time

Working with Local Authorities / Port Health Authorities to ensure that imported foods are clearly highlighted to the lab, so that we can identify and analyse relevant test data



PHE Studies of imported food

Study	Year(s)	% samples from EU (not UK)	% samples from third countries	Key findings
Breaded chicken	2020	~45		Salmonella in 8%
Raw milk cheese	2019/20	52	8	0.6% potentially hazardous; STEC (DNA) in 10 samples
Frozen fruit & veg	2018/9	27	14	L. mono in 10%
Chilled RTE foods	2017	57	1	EU and non-EU countries – similar results
Fresh herbs	2013	18	24	Salmonella in 1%



Conclusions

EU Exit has already had a considerable impact on logistical / practical aspects of our work

Impact on workload is anticipated in relation to imported food testing – not yet fully understood

Some surveillance already undertaken on European products

- this needs to be an increased focus in future