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UK Faces Alarming Food Security Shortfalls, Farmers Warn

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The United Kingdom remains vulnerable to potential food supply disruptions, according to Tom Bradshaw, president of the National Farmers Union (NFU). Despite heightened awareness following the COVID-19 pandemic, he warns that Britain's dependence on imported produce has grown significantly, with only 65% of the nation's food produced domestically in 2023, compared to 78% in 1984.

Bradshaw stressed that without decisive reforms, reversing this trend could become increasingly difficult. He urged the government to treat food security with the same priority as national defence, citing geopolitical instability, trade uncertainties, and environmental pressures as key risks.

The UK produces just 15% of its fruit and 53% of its vegetables, while approximately 85% of farmland is devoted to livestock. Analysts note that this imbalance could heighten the risk of malnutrition if import routes were disrupted by trade barriers, conflict, or extreme weather events.

Professor Tim Benton, former UK food security ambassador, highlighted the structural vulnerabilities in Britain's food system. "Recent crises, including the war in Ukraine, changing US trade policies, and severe weather events, demonstrate how exposed our food supply remains," he said. Benton also noted that production is concentrated geographically, with livestock farming in the west and arable crops in the east, leaving the system susceptible to regional shocks.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has pledged £11.8 billion to food production during this parliamentary term and extended the Seasonal Worker Visa Scheme to address labour shortages. However, many growers argue that these measures may not be sufficient to maintain domestic production without either higher consumer prices or increased government support.

Consumption patterns also contribute to the challenge, with a year-round demand for imported produce such as bananas and pineapples. Retailers often import cheaper alternatives rather than invest in domestic production, while growers face unpredictable markets, rising energy costs, and weather-related risks.

Experts recommend increasing the domestic production of fruit and vegetables to meet government dietary guidelines, estimating that an additional 1.5 million tonnes of fresh produce could be grown within the UK. While complete self-sufficiency may be unrealistic, Bradshaw and other experts argue that a balanced approach combining local production and trade is critical to mitigate future food security risks.

The NFU calls for immediate action to strengthen the UK's resilience to external shocks, safeguard domestic agriculture, and ensure a sustainable food supply for the coming decades.

