

Say hello to the TTIP chickens!

U.S. poultry is chilled in antimicrobial baths that include chlorine to keep salmonella and other bacteria in check. In the EU, chlorine treatment was banned in the 1990s out of fear that it could cause cancer.

Now there is a real fear that Regulatory Convergence in TTIP would lead to a dilution of farm to fork practices within the EU as industry strives through the Regulatory Cooperation Council of TTIP to depress standards to the lowest and more profitable levels.

The EU operates on the precautionary principle, where efforts to control foodborne illness are all conducted in the live bird. For example, the grandparent stock, the breeder stock that makes the egg of the chicken we eat eventually — all of those flocks of chicken are tested regularly for salmonella, and if any of these chickens test positive, farmers have to get rid of the entire flock.

As a result, salmonella in chickens has been reduced to below 2 percent — people want to eat fresh chicken that's air-chilled rather than dumped in chlorinated water tanks.

Of course this makes poultry production more expensive in the EU than in the US and this gives rise to another problem because the initial phase of Regulatory Convergence in TTIP involves mutual recognition of standards. So, the EU will recognise US standards for imports to the EU and vice versa. This would result in cheaper chlorine-washed US chicken sitting on the supermarket shelf alongside more expensively produced farm-to-fork EU chicken.

There can be little doubt that many hard-pressed consumers will opt for the cheaper product and that employment in chicken-production in places like Monaghan would diminish — to say nothing of possible negative outcomes for consumer's health.

The second part of the convergence process would see standards being harmonised between the EU and US. This would inevitably see EU producers whose market share has diminished, under pressure to drop standards in order to gain competitive access to the US market. The US would also be pressurising the EU to drop standards in order to gain an even greater share of the EU market.

A big problem is that this will all take place in secret in the Regulatory Cooperation Council where the revised standards will be agreed between the stakeholders and the Commission. There will be no trade unionists or environmental group stakeholders at the table and any expertise required will be drawn from industry. Hence, there will be no public debate before revised measures are introduced.

The final step in the process would see regulatory revision on an ongoing basis as regulations on both sides of the Atlantic are fully harmonised. Of course, this process doesn't only apply to chickens or food, but also to chemicals, electronics, cars, etc.

Chlorinated chickens merely serve as an example. Beside changes in chicken production, the possibility of hormone-treated beef and genetically engineered crops entering the EU market hovers in the background if TTIP succeeds.