

# Case #3a. An Ethical code for Rationing Fruit and Vegetables in the UK



UK supermarket shelves lay bare as farmers face a ‘perfect storm’ of events. - Copyright AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth

By **Angela Symons** • Updated: 23/02/2023

[https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/02/22/food-shortages-why-are-uk-supermarkets-rationing-fruit-and-vegetables?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=green\\_newsletter&\\_open=eyJndWlkIjojYzZiNGIzMjg2MDIxNjVhMTlmMzllZTA0YzdlNjJiYWQifQ%3D%3D](https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/02/22/food-shortages-why-are-uk-supermarkets-rationing-fruit-and-vegetables?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=green_newsletter&_open=eyJndWlkIjojYzZiNGIzMjg2MDIxNjVhMTlmMzllZTA0YzdlNjJiYWQifQ%3D%3D)

In mid-February 2023, British supermarket shelves lay bare as farmers battle with labour shortages, soaring energy costs, inflation, supply chain issues and climate change.

**Eggs** and salad ingredients have been particularly affected by this “perfect storm” of events.

“Everybody wants to avoid **rationing**... which is what we saw with eggs in December,” Minette Batters, president of the **National Farmers’ Union (NFU)** of England and Wales, told Sky News.

“I think there are going to be challenges on availability of some food items,” she continued in the interview following the NFU’s annual conference on Tuesday.

So far, three British supermarkets have introduced rationing to combat **shortages**.

**Grocery retailer Morrisons** has placed two per item limit on cucumbers, lettuce, peppers and tomatoes.

**Retailer Asda** is limiting sales of broccoli, cauliflower, cucumbers, lettuce, peppers, raspberries, salad bags, and tomatoes to three per customer.

In a YouGov poll, 61 per cent of UK respondents said they have personally noticed or experienced food shortages in their local shop or **supermarket** in the last few weeks.

Tomato and **vegetable** shortages have also been reported in **Ireland**.

## Why are there food shortages in the UK?

**Farmers** in England and Wales have been hit with soaring inflation.

Since 2019, the cost of **fertiliser** has gone up by 169 per cent, Batters said at the NFU conference. With the backdrop of rising gas prices due to **Russian** sanctions, energy costs are up 79 per cent - three times higher than normal. Animal feed, meanwhile, is up 57 per cent.

Overall, UK farmers face costs that are almost 50 per cent higher than in 2019. Elsewhere producers are also suffering the snowball effects of the energy crisis too.

Despite the rise in supermarket food prices, many farmers are still facing higher production costs than profit.

Labour shortages have also hit hard in the UK. The situation is particularly bad in the **poultry** industry which is already reeling from the **bird flu outbreak**, as well as horticultural businesses and pig farms. This is partially due to post-Brexit restrictions on freedom of movement.

**Extreme weather** has only added to these struggles. The UK has faced abnormally high temperatures in both summer and winter, as well as drought in some parts of the country, which has impacted crops and livestock.

Abnormal weather abroad has also impacted yields, particularly in southern Europe and northern Africa. This is expected to affect imports for the next few weeks.

## Which food items are most at risk in the UK?

According to Batters, UK production of salad ingredients is expected to fall to the lowest levels since records began in 1985.

Tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, field vegetables and potatoes are particularly at risk.

In **Morocco** - which the UK relies on heavily for tomatoes since Brexit - cold temperatures, heavy rain, flooding and cancelled ferries have also caused restrictions on tomato exports.

Eggs are also affected. UK production has fallen to its lowest level in nine years, with nearly a billion fewer eggs produced in 2022 compared to 2019.

An NFU survey of **livestock** producers found that 40 per cent of beef farmers and 36 per cent of sheep farmers are planning to reduce numbers in the next 12 months, primarily due to rising costs.

## Are there food shortages elsewhere in Europe?

Below freezing temperatures in **Spain** have affected certain fruit and vegetable growers, particularly in the southeast municipality of Almería, which is the main supplier of vegetables to Europe during the winter months.

This has impacted exports to Ireland but does not seem to have significantly affected mainland Europe so far.

While Ireland would usually depend on Dutch imports from April, **growers** are not heating their greenhouses due to the energy crisis. This has caused shortages of items like aubergines, tomatoes and cucumbers that could continue for some time yet.

Since Brexit, the UK has relied on imports from outside Europe for some food items.

In a video shared on Twitter, Save British Farming chair Liz Webster claims, “The reason that we have food shortages in Britain and that we don’t have food shortages in Spain - or anywhere else in the European Union - is because of **Brexit**.”

She adds, “Brexit messed up our trade. This also impacted our labour supply because it ended freedom of movement. It also removed the cap and food subsidies.”

## **How can UK farmers’ issues be resolved?**

Improving the farming industry’s resilience relies heavily on government policy.

The NFU is urging the UK government to promote domestic **food** production and put British farmers first when negotiating trade deals.

It has also called for improved support for the energy-intensive industry in the face of soaring bills. The **agriculture** and horticulture sectors are currently not eligible for the government’s energy support scheme.

Embracing **sustainable farming** practices and new technologies, such as on-farm **renewables** generation and carbon sequestration, is also key to securing the industry’s future.

The NFU has called for government schemes to incentivise positive environmental action by farmers. It has also urged it to take the issue of **food security** as seriously as **energy security**.

## **What can you do to help combat food shortages?**

First of all, Batters urges consumers not to **panic buy**. Doing so could risk creating further shortages and inflation.

Buying local not only helps support local farmers but also avoids the climate change-inducing effects of importing.

## CASE QUESTIONS

UK Supermarkets are being forced to consider rationing consumer purchases of fruits and vegetable..

1. (2) Create a simple food rationing ethical code by
  - a. choosing a “general precept” to guide food rationing and then
  - b. a set of “specific practices” that would help in implementation of food rationing objectives if you were a UK food retailer like Asda (or choose an EU grocery chain with which you are familiar). Present your specific practices in the form, “Asda should...’ **(25 words maximum for each specific practice)**
2. (2) What would you find to be the most difficult part of implementation of your code? **(80 words maximum)**