Why selling edible insects is now illegal in the UK?

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Currently, edible insects cannot be sold in the United Kingdom. What happened? Why was it legal before? And what can we expect for the future of the sector? We summarize the latest UK developments for you in this article, on the time of writing.

In 2015, the Revision of the 1997 EU Novel Food legislation confirmed that edible insects could be considered as novel foods and harmonised the authorisation requirements in the European Union. Producers of insect based-foods had to submit a dossier to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) for each specific product they wish to sell on the European market. On 13 January 2021, the EFSA issued its first authorisation to allow the commercialisation of dried yellow mealworms[1]. Since then, various edible insect products have been considered as safe by the EFSA (frozen and dried migratory locusts; frozen, dried and powder forms of Acheta domesticus etc).

In the meantime, a transition measure has been put into place in order to ensure producers continue marketing their insect-based foods in Member States where it was authorised under the previous 1997 Novel Food Regulation. This explains why some insect-based food products could continue to be sold in various Member States, including the United Kingdom —ahead of their EU-level authorisation[2].

On 1 February 2020, after years of negotiation, the United Kingdom officially left the European Union. The UK decided to treat insects as novel foods, without transposing the transition measures

[1] https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/6343

[2] For more information, please consult our Policy brief: insects as food and feed in the EU.

in its legislation nor taking into consideration the already published EFSA opinions on various edible insects. This means that, since the end of the Brexit transition period on 30 December 2020, **insects are not regulated nor authorised for sale in the country anymore**[3].

The UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) is now requiring insect companies to submit dossiers of evidence of safety, regardless of whether their products were previously declared safe for consumption by EFSA.

UK insect producers and retailers report that these circumstances are forcing some of them "*to close their farms, cease trading, and discontinue insect dishes*"[4].

In reaction to these developments, the Woven Network (UK Network for Insects as Food and Feed) has entered in dialogue with the FSA and DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) to highlight the potential of edible insects as well as its safety. The Woven Network also submitted a Novel Food dossier for house crickets, in collaboration with the start-up HOP. A second dossier for yellow mealworms is expected to be sent out later this year. It is not clear how much time the FSA will take to respond to these applications, however The Woven Network says it expects it will take around 18 months[5].

How do the current circumstances impact on the work of ValuSect and relevant academic research?

At ValuSect, we work to unlock the great potential of edible insects as an alternative sustainable protein to help feed the growing population. Insects require few resources in terms of land and water use, have a lower greenhouse gas emissions impact and contribute to circularity by being fed with side streams. Protein content of edible insects can be up to 65% on the basis of dry matter and they can also provide carbohydrates, fibres, vitamins and minerals.

During the project, we also aim to boost the development of edible insects SMEs in the whole Interreg North-West Europe region through vouchers calls.

ValuSect has two partners located in the UK: BIC Innovation and Aberystwyth University, both impacted by the current situation in the country.

Aberystwyth University's research is supporting UK business and sustainable food development. Resolving the legal situation will mean the sector is able to fully realise these important benefits. To date, the University's Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS) research project has been studying crickets, grasshoppers and yellow mealworms as human food. Black soldier fly species (*Hermetia Illucens*) have now been added to the research menu which extends the work to look at using insect products in animal feed. They are also promoting the voucher scheme for businesses in the UK proposing services to develop insects as feed business, for example optimising insect breeding conditions. Understanding consumer acceptability of the taste and physical profile of insect containing products is important for successful product development by SMEs. A resolution of the legal position will mean that the

[3] https://www.hopbar.co.uk/post/bringbackcrickets
[4] https://www.hopbar.co.uk/post/bringbackcrickets
[5] https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2022/02/03/a-major-milestone-for-the-uk-edible-insect-sector-uk-edible-insect-makers-hope-for-novel-food-approval-by-2023

taste testing element of the project can continue apace so that the economic and sustainability gains from the work can come to fruition.

From the perspective of BIC Innovation, the main impact has been the uncertainty and inconsistency about how local environmental health officials are interpreting the new stance, making it very difficult for businesses to plan and attract investment whilst the legal standing of insects is in question. The whole sector needs considerable R&D investment, and whilst ValuSect has been able to support some R&D through the Innovation Voucher scheme, the lack of clarity over the legal position will make it very difficult for SMEs in the sector to attract private investment to support the commercialisation, and therefore the growth, of this sector.

What does the future hold for the sector?

According to The Global Market Insights report, the worldwide edible insects market exceeded 112 million USD in 2019. They forecasted a 47% growth between 2019 and 2026.

In Europe, it started with SMEs breeding insects for biocontrol purposes or the production of animal feed. In the last decade, it grew quickly, with the apparition of insect feed business operators and insect food business operators (iFBOs)[6]. In 2019, European iFBOs placed in total 500 tons of insect-based products on the Old Continent. The edible insect products market is expected to reach 260.000 tons by 2030[7].

According to the Woven network, the edible insects sector represented more than £6 million (7.186.200€) in revenue in the UK in the past decade. The sector could reach an annual revenue of more than £112m (134.153.600€) nationally by 2025 if the legal issues are resolved[8].

However, as we explained above, the growth of companies in the UK is currently being put on hold due to the lack of authorisation to market their insect-based food products in the country. The first authorisations by the FSA should allow the UK insect sector to grow to its full potential and provide healthy and sustainable protein.

[6] https://www.mdpi.com/2304-8158/11/3/455/pdf
[7] https://ipiff.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/10-06-2020-IPIFF-edible-insects-market-factsheet.pdf
[8] https://www.thenationalnews.com/Business/UK/2022/03/28/uks-edible-insect-traders-bugged-by-lack-of-proper-legislation/

What is ValuSect?

ValuSect is a project funded by Interreg North-West Europe. The ValuSect consortium will improve the sustainable production and processing techniques of insect-based products and transfer developed knowledge to agri-food businesses in North-West Europe.

Since March 2021, the project extended its focus to the insect feed sector.

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