

Rose Bridger, food system consultant, looks at the rapid rise of air freight imports of food into the UK

Freshly flown in?



Credit: Pamela Troni

If you've ever been on a passenger on a plane, there was probably cargo underneath you in the bellyhold. It is highly likely that some of this cargo was food. It could be primary produce such as fruit, vegetables, fish and meat destined for stores and ingredients for processed foods. In addition to the airline meals served on the flight, meals for the return flight could be on board, as sometimes only a small number of factories meet the manufacturers' exacting specifications. Some of the food for the hotels and restaurants could accompany you on flights to tourist destinations. Livestock, along with pets and wildlife are clocking up more air miles, and could also be on board. But more cargo, including food, is shifting to dedicated freighters.

Passengers are confined to the airports' retail and catering areas. But take a look at satellite images of Heathrow, the world's business airport, and you get an idea of the scale of the operation

as a whole. The airport is already as large as the most built up area of the city of London. Zoom in and there's a massive expanse of grey sheds and lorries. Some of these are for food and flowers, as are some of the buildings in developments aligned with the airport.

How much is flying in?

In 2005 British Airways World Cargo (BAWC) opened up another floor at their Heathrow perishables handling facility for food and flowers, increasing throughput from 90,000 to 140,000 tonnes. Along with exotics, some of the imports like raspberries and blackberries are produce that is, or could be, produced more locally, if not a year round supply with cartoon like uniformity. Other carriers like Virgin are getting in on food and flowers imports at Heathrow with new refrigerated storage facilities.

Elsewhere in the UK, Manchester Airport opened a facility for temperature controlled goods in March, and plans to triple throughput to 18,000 tonnes within two years. Robin Hood, Doncaster is one of our country's more

recently established airports planning refrigerated storage for food. Humberside Airport's recently published Masterplan through to 2030 is cargo oriented planning for growing imports of fish from Iceland, and exports of processed perishable food products.

While the media fixates on the rise in, and environmental impact of, passenger flights, cargo is rising faster and a lot of the development at airports is cargo related. Worldwide, the largest and fastest growing air cargo sector is 'perishables' which means cargo that requires temperature control. Industry estimates for the annual increase are creeping upwards from about 10%. About 80% of this perishables sector is food and flowers. Most of this is primary produce, but processed foods is a growing sector and encompasses everything from trimmed vegetables or peeled and diced fruit through to highly processed chilled products such as ready meals.

Moving round and round

As always, the food chain is complex to unravel, and air freight is not as direct as claimed. There are often connecting flights and distribution is entangled with the geographical dispersion which affects the food chain generally. Hence BAWC's perishable food and

flowers imports to Stansted and Gatwick are trucked to the Heathrow facility for consolidation.

The Soil

Association's recent Air Freight Green Paper outlines some of the complexities of calculating the environmental effects, and although the relative effects vary greatly, air freight generates up to 177 times more greenhouse gases than shipping for the distance travelled. Perishable foods also require a chill-chain of refrigeration from farm to plate which is predominantly fossil fuel dependent.

As well as retrospective calculations of the impact of food air freight, we need to look ahead at infrastructure development at and aligned with airports. Support for shorter food chains is often confined to promotional and educational activity, so low down on planning priorities and designation of space that farmers' markets might end up in a supermarket car park. Meanwhile the infrastructure to enable ever lengthier air freighted food chains goes up and expands like Lego and is often so integrated into policy development that it has become invisible.

Is it tackling poverty?

There is expansion of export capacity for air freight of food and flowers in many countries, including the poorest with widespread hunger. Kenya's well established horticulture and floriculture air freight exports are hailed as a successful example of development, but it remains classified by the World Food Programme as a low income, food deficit country.

Aggressive export competition means other poor countries going down a similar "development" path may not be able to achieve even the relatively high export earnings compared to traditional commodities. It is doubtful that the best way to lift people out of poverty is to fly escalating quantities of food out over their heads. ■

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