

Minister washes his hands of Brexit threat to boycott Irish beef

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Agriculture Minister Michael Creed has alarmed the agriculture sector by washing his hands of a threat to the beef sector from British supermarkets.

In the wake of a threat to ban Irish beef, the minister said it was "for the industry to decide" whether the Irish beef market's 50pc stronghold on the British marketplace will stand in the wake of Brexit.

Mr Creed's lacklustre response followed a British supermarket giant launching a 'British only' campaign.

The minister's comments will alarm farmers who are reliant on exports to Britain after the supermarket Co-op piled pressure on competitors to not stock Irish beef.

Irish Exporters Association head Simon McKeever warned this is the "first" of the pro-nationalist moves to emerge from the British market as the supermarket called on other chains to back "home-grown goods".

"If it was to spread to other retailers like Morrisons and Tesco and others it could be very damaging as Tesco is a major buyer," he said.

However, Mr McKeever pointed out Britain remains just 60pc self-sufficient in food - which means it is reliant on imports.

The Co-op chain does not stock Irish meat but it was extremely vocal in highlighting that Ireland was the "biggest beneficiary" of the EU meat trade with Britain.



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But as Ireland's €1.15bn beef trade with Britain hangs in the Brexit crosshairs, Mr Creed played down the problem.

He told RTÉ Radio it was "not for me, it's for the industry to decide" if Ireland continues to command a 50pc slice of that market post-Brexit.

However, he did stress his officials were working to open other markets.

"I and my department, along with Bord Bia, are very conscious of the need to ensure that we have ongoing engagement with customers of Irish produce in the UK," he said, adding he has met the CEOs of all the main British retailers.

"These meetings were to emphasise to them our strong desire to maintain the close trading relationship in food products from Irish suppliers."

Ireland's meat processing factories stressed Irish beef had a "long tradition and strong reputation" in the British market.

Meat Industry Ireland director Cormac Healy said they played an important role in supplying meat to retail and food services throughout the UK.

"The Brexit development obviously holds major concerns for us in terms of our future trading relationship and access to this important market.

"If we are now seeing an intensification of a 'Buy British' campaign, this is obviously going to be a further challenge. However, in the context of the Co-op announcement, it is the case that the chain has not been stocking Irish beef," he said.

A spokesman for Bord Bia stressed the biggest British retailers buy Irish beef.