

The UK Referendum and the Environment - An Expert Review

Environment risks and opportunities

East Anglia, 23.06.2016, 00:07 Time

USPA NEWS - United Kingdom referendum:- environment risks and opportunities - EU membership has transformed the UK's environmental protection policies since 1973, according to experts from the University of East Anglia.

“The UK Referendum and the Environment - An Expert Review’ today reveals that “Brexit’ would generate many significant and uncertain risks to current levels of environmental protection enjoyed by UK citizens, although it would also create some opportunities. The environmental effects of being in the EU are very well-documented but the implications of a Brexit are much less understood, the expert review finds. On balance, the net environmental benefits of EU membership have been positive, the review concludes:

- Action taken to fulfil EU obligations has been a major factor underpinning the marked improvement in environmental quality in the UK since the 1980s.

- The EU's effect is most evident in areas such as water quality, waste recycling and the protection of natural habitats.

- EU policies have stimulated significant infrastructure investments in offshore wind power and water treatment (e.g. the Thames Tideway Tunnel) which will generate environmental benefits for decades to come. The Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies have been far less successful in environmental terms. The CAP has generated pollution and accelerated the decline of some bird populations. For much of its history, the Common Fisheries Policy has failed to ensure economically and ecologically sustainable fishing across EU waters.

One of the review's lead authors Prof Andy Jordan, from UEA's School of Environmental Sciences, said: “Thus far, the environmental implications of leaving the EU have mostly been ignored in the referendum debate. This review seeks to inform voters by exploring the environmental risks and opportunities of voting to Remain or Leave the EU. It does not recommend them to vote one way or the other.”

The leaflet that the Government sent to every home in the UK briefly mentions climate change but not the environment, fisheries or agriculture.

The review concludes that on the basis of current expert knowledge, the level of uncertainty associated with remaining in a “reformed” EU is relatively low, as compared to the “Norwegian” and, in particular, the “free trade” alternatives.

(Source: University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich, Norfolk, NR4 7TJ, UK. Switchboard: +44 (0) 1603 456161.)

If the UK votes to Remain -

This option essentially represents a continuation of the status quo. EU rules would continue to provide a common minimum standard across Europe. Inside the EU, the UK would retain the opportunity to push for more competitiveness reforms to existing rules which, the review notes, have not been significantly weakened thus far.

If the UK votes to Leave -

A vote to Leave would push the UK into uncharted waters because UK and EU policy are now very deeply intertwined and no state has left the EU before.

The “Norwegian” Option -

The UK would have the opportunity to weaken current EU rules on bathing water, habitats and wild birds. Research on this scenario suggests the UK would still have to comply with the vast majority of other EU rules to secure access to the single market, but with less ability to shape them. UK politicians would be free to negotiate international agreements directly with the UN, but research suggests that they would probably align themselves with EU positions.

The “Free Trade” Option -

Fully disentangling the UK from existing EU commitments would be a significant logistical task for central and devolved governments, lasting many years. UK politicians would have the opportunity to strengthen national standards in this scenario, although they can already do this within the EU (but generally choose not to). As environment is a devolved matter, policies across the countries of the UK are more likely to diverge in this scenario. Politicians could fast track controversial technologies such as GM food and fracking, less restrained by EU rules.

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Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-8424/the-uk-referendum-and-the-environment-an-expert-review.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Daren Frankish

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619