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U.K. Lawmakers Open an Inquiry Into Scotch Whisky

The review will examine tariffs, export pressures and rising domestic costs as sales weaken in a key British industry.

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A committee of the U.K. Parliament has opened an inquiry into the Scotch whisky industry, putting tariffs, trade policy and domestic regulation at the center of a review that could shape how one of Britain’s biggest drinks exports is treated in future policy debates.

The Scottish Affairs Committee announced the inquiry on Thursday, saying it will examine the future of Scotch whisky and assess how trade policy, tariffs and regulation inside the U.K. are affecting the sector. The committee said it will study both export conditions and pressures at home, including energy costs, labor shortages and the planned Deposit Return Scheme.

Scotch whisky is one of Scotland’s best-known products and one of the U.K.’s largest beverage exports. According to the committee, the industry contributes billions of pounds to the economy and supports 41,000 jobs across Scotland. It also plays a central role in tourism, drawing visitors to distilleries and whisky regions across the country.

The inquiry comes as the sector faces weaker export performance after a recent high. The committee said Scotch whisky exports reached £6.2 billion in 2022, then fell to £5.6 billion in 2023, with further declines in early 2024. Because about 90% of production is sold overseas, including in major markets such as the United States and India, the industry is especially exposed to tariffs, trade agreements and shifts in global demand.

That export dependence gives the parliamentary review wider importance for the drinks business. Any recommendations that affect market access, tariff relief or domestic operating costs could eventually matter not only for Scotch producers but also for importers, distributors, retailers and hospitality businesses tied to premium spirits sales. Changes in regulation or trade terms could also offer an early signal for how governments may approach other beverage categories that rely heavily on exports.

Patricia Ferguson, chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, said the industry is working in “an increasingly challenging environment,” facing trade uncertainty as well as rising costs and regulatory pressure at home. She said the inquiry will look at both opportunities and risks for the sector and consider how the U.K. government can help it benefit from tariff reliefs and broader trade policy.

Ferguson also pointed to domestic issues that lawmakers plan to examine in detail, including the Deposit Return Scheme, workforce pressures and higher energy bills. Those issues have become more important for distillers as production costs rise and companies try to protect margins while maintaining investment in aging stocks, tourism facilities and export growth.

The committee said it wants evidence on the overall health of the Scotch whisky sector and on how trade negotiations and market access talks influence export performance. It will also investigate how regulatory and operational pressures inside the U.K. are affecting producers.

Written submissions have been invited from businesses, trade groups and other specialists, with a deadline of Sept. 18. The inquiry’s findings could add political weight to industry arguments over competitiveness at a time when Scotch whisky remains a major source of export revenue but faces a more difficult global trading environment than it did just a few years ago.