

## **Commercial Farmers Group**

### **The Vital Need for Progress in Biotechnology**

The Commercial Farmers Group has been supportive of allowing trials to assess the effectiveness and safety of biotechnology products for a number of years. At the same time we recognised that EU consumers and their politicians were not as positive. We feel that now there is a willingness amongst some influential politicians and a greater proportion of potential consumers to consider whether there is a place for biotechnology to play a greater part in EU Agriculture. We are pleased to note that the UK Government is taking a lead on this subject. We believe it is essential that the argument for biotechnology is made clearly and is based wholly on science. Biotechnology has much to offer in the fields of medicine and energy, as well as food production.

Professor Sir John Beddington, until recently the Chief Scientific Adviser to the government, has warned more than once of the “Perfect Storm” which the world’s population faces in feeding itself. His analysis has not been seriously challenged. In 1950 1 hectare of land was required to feed 2 people, by 2050 1 hectare of land will need to feed 5 people. We shall require 50% more energy and 50% more food than we do now and our water requirement will rise by 30%. In addition biotechnology will help agriculture replace the petrochemical sector as the sustainable source of many chemicals to industry putting additional requirements on land use.

To meet these challenges we must improve farm productivity and reduce our environmental footprint. To achieve this we shall need to make radical choices, positive choices, accelerate innovation and share knowledge. Productive land must be preserved, water must be used more effectively and biodiversity must be protected. We need to build prosperity, create new markets and develop sustainably constructive communities. At a political level, globally, we shall need to give greater resource to improve farm productivity.

It is estimated that biotechnology could contribute 2.7% of the GDP of OECD countries by 2030<sup>i</sup>. If the EU continues to ignore the potential of biotechnology it will result in EU farmers becoming less competitive in a global context and either require EU agriculture to be more heavily supported and protected – or there will be a further reduction in self sufficiency of indigenous products. Already the UK is less than 70% self-sufficient in indigenous food products and this percentage is declining. Very simply we have to ask whether existing policy on biotechnology is sensible.

For most people who live on farms and make a living from the land the answer has been no. Policy has been heavily influenced by organisations portraying a very different picture from the reality. Existing technology has made great advances but those gains have plateaued and there has been a cost. That cost is not so much the much vaunted loss of biodiversity, it is more a question of how sustainable present modern farming methods are for retaining the productivity of our soils, let alone increasing it. Healthier soils coupled with sound rotational practice, precision farming techniques, the uptake of biotechnology and more constructive use of less productive land for biodiversity will result in higher levels of food production on a sustainable basis.

In the UK we have world class basic science but have not progressed with the application of that science. It is crucial that the farming industry is helped by creating innovation platforms such as that

at North Wyke, allowing the BBSRC and the organisations it sponsors to work with commercial companies to test out potential practical benefits from our basic science. It is indeed a platform we require on which innovative ideas can be tested and, when relevant, allow organisations such as NIAB, ADAS and the AHDB to develop into practical solutions. What we need to do is focus on these existing organisations rather than creating alternatives and diluting the effect. Horticulture will need to be seen as a special case as its support structure has been severely weakened. If the solutions are robust and offer a competitive advantage, farmers and growers will rapidly pick them up and refine them for their individual businesses and locations.

There is a second very important requirement which is the encouragement of talented, energetic applied scientists who can work alongside their pure science counterparts to achieve practical outcomes.

We are encouraged by present Government enthusiasm for biotechnology, by the launch of the Agricultural Technology Strategy, the content of the “Feeding the Future” paper and the creation of an innovation platform. We believe that after 25 years of relative regression in agricultural technology we shall start to see progress. There is no reason why UK agriculture cannot make a significantly greater economic contribution if it is allowed the “tools” to do so and do this more competitively and sustainably.

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<sup>i</sup> The Bioeconomy to 2030: Designing a Policy Agenda – ISBN-978-92-64-03853-0 © OECD 2009