

FEEDING THE WORLD NEEDS THE APPLIANCE OF SCIENCE

David Kidney MP explains how an all-party pressure group is promoting modern farming methods plus research and development to address global food production challenges

PROGRESSIVE AGRICULTURE

Renewed interest in modern, progressive agriculture reflects an urgent need to address the global challenges of food security, climate change and resource conservation. We are facing an acknowledged crisis in global food production. Demand is beginning to outstrip supply, and the only realistic prospect of producing enough food for a global population set to reach nine billion by 2050 is through productivity growth – more output per hectare.

What's more, with the potential loss of half the world's arable land over the next 40 years due to water shortage, salinity and drought, some commentators have highlighted the particular responsibility of countries less vulnerable to the impact of climate change, such as the UK, to maximise their agricultural potential – and I would agree.

Support for organic farming and traditional farming methods is admirable, but I don't believe the future for British agriculture as a whole lies in turning back the clock and resisting innovation. I'm convinced that advances in science and technology will be essential to help British farmers respond to this new agenda.

At the same time, I'm concerned that without a more balanced and informed public debate, without truly science-based regulation – free from political intervention or prejudice – and without serious re-investment in our agricultural science base, access to those advances might be missed and opportunities for British farmers may be lost.

For too long, I believe we as a society have taken the contribution of scientific progress in agriculture for granted. More than that, we have become complacent about the availability and affordability of food, and allowed a creeping demonisation of modern farming practices.

As a consequence, there has been a gradual erosion of public investment in production-based agricultural research, an over-emphasis on environmental objectives, and a shift towards unscientific or politically motivated regulation



of agricultural innovation, particularly within the EU.

Against this background, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture aims to promote renewed debate among UK politicians and other stakeholders. As a relatively new forum, established in March this year, our objective is not only to recognise and understand the contribution science and technology can make to 21st Century agriculture, but also to identify any policy, knowledge-based or regulatory barriers to its adoption.

KEY QUESTIONS

Is agricultural science valued in the UK? Is our science policy and R&D framework fit for purpose? Is the balance right between production and environmental protection? Is the transmission from laboratory to field working effectively, and focused on the right priorities? Does our regulatory framework foster or stifle innovation?

These and other issues will shape the Group's programme of work over the coming months.

Our first meeting this autumn, for example, focused on widespread concerns about the potentially devastating impact on crop yields and food prices of current EU plans to introduce new pesticide authorisation rules. These proposals appear to be directly at odds with renewed political efforts to boost global food production, and there is certainly

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a case for requiring a proper, EU-wide assessment of the impact of these measures before they are implemented.

Towards the end of November, DEFRA chief scientist Professor Bob Watson will join the Group to share his perspective on the role of UK agriculture in responding to global food security concerns, and the implications this might have for the DEFRA science base.

Again, this promises to be an extremely thought-provoking session, particularly in view of recent departmental changes to shift responsibilities for climate change out of DEFRA into a new Department of Energy and Climate Change. I was delighted to host the recent launch of the NFU's excellent *Why Science Matters for Farming* report, at which the Government's chief scientist, Prof John Beddington, gave a clear indication that these changes might signal a renewed focus within DEFRA on agricultural productivity. We look forward to finding out more.

Since the Group was established, we have received representations from different sectors of the farming industry expressing concern over the increasing divide between basic science and applied R&D in the UK. This will be the theme of the Group's meeting in January, to investigate the background to these concerns, and to consider calls for renewed public sector investment in translational or near-market research.

Finally, in March, the Group will turn its attentions to GM crops – to take stock of the global status of the technology, and find out what's in the pipeline from the next generation of GM traits.

It promises to be a stimulating series of meetings. The role of science and technology has always been important in farming, but never more so than today.

• *David Kidney, Labour MP for Stafford, is chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture. To find out more about the All-Party Group and its work, visit www.appg-agscience.org.uk*