



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

Notes of a meeting held on Tuesday 9 September 2014

Committee Room 15, Palace of Westminster

Building public support for UK agri-science

Present:

Members

George Freeman MP
Mark Spencer MP
Earl of Selborne
Lord Curry of Kirkharle
Lord Haskins
Lord Taverne
Bill Wiggin MP

Guest Speakers:

Tom Heap, broadcast journalist and BBC Countryfile presenter
Andrew Opie, Food Policy Director, British Retail Consortium

Stakeholders

Colin West, MAGB; Mimi Tanimoto, UK Plant Sciences Federation; Sez Maxted, NIAB Trust; Lydia Smith, NIAB; Alan Wilkinson, HSBC; David Chilvers, Fera; Martin Collison, Collison Associates; Matina Tsalavouta, Rothamsted Research; Prof Tony Allan, Kings College London; Prof David Leaver, RABDF; Sam White, BIS; Mark Buckingham, Monsanto; Verity Trelfall, BIS; Stephen Axford, BIS; Jack Ward, British Growers Association; Richard Whitlock, Oxford Farming Conference; Paul Rooke, AIC; James Wallace, Dalton Seeds; Barry Hackett, FarmWise; Isabel Hackett; Neil Hipps, University of Kent; Beth Brockett, POST; Anna Tiley, University of Bristol; Jeremy Day, Fleischman Hillard; Katrina Hayter, Fera; Martin Savage, nabim; Caroline O'Leary, nabim; Philip Hambling, Sainsburys; Tom Sheldon, Science Media Centre; Chris Potter, British Poultry Council; Elaine Ward, Defra; Prof Brendan Noble, Suffolk University; Oliver Savory, NFU; Sean Ryan, Defra; Daniel Pearsall, Group Co-ordinator

1. Welcome & Introduction

Outgoing chairman George Freeman MP opened the meeting, briefly describing his new role as the UK Government's first Minister for Life Sciences, which was primarily focused on unlocking the UK's innovative capacity in biomedical research but also with a broader remit to champion the role of the UK biosciences sector in providing solutions to feed, fuel and heal a global population set to increase from 7 billion to 9 billion people by 2050.

GF highlighted the importance of the All-Party Group's work over the past four years as an extremely effective platform in raising the political profile of agri-science, and in helping to persuade the British Government – through the Agri-Tech Strategy – to recognise agriculture as a strategically significant contributor to the UK economy for the first time in 40 years.

GF thanked everyone who had supported the Group during his time as chair.

2. Election of chair

GF nominated Mark Spencer MP to succeed him as chair of the All-Party Group. No other nominations for chair were received.

Mark Spencer's nomination as chair was supported by all Members present.

As newly elected chair, MS paid tribute to George Freeman's contribution to the All-Party Group's work over the past four years, noting that GF's promotion to a Ministerial position was in no small measure due to the success and prominence of the Group over that time.

3. Guest speakers

MS introduced the session as the third in a focused series of meetings hosted by the All-Party Group to examine consumer attitudes to agri-science, and explore ways to build better public engagement, understanding and acceptance of the use of technology and innovation in farming and food production. Previous meetings had highlighted significance of the media and food retailers as key factors in shaping public attitudes towards agri-science, and it was therefore timely to hear from today's speakers Tom Heap, TV presenter, journalist and rural affairs specialist, and Andrew Opie, food policy director at the British Retail Consortium.

Tom Heap, broadcast journalist and BBC Countryfile presenter

Tom Heap (TH) noted that he was joining the APPG's conversation on this issue mid-stream, with significant contributions already made by the likes of Sir Mark Walport, Ian Blatchford, Guy Smith and Mark Lynas.

TH suggested that the media agenda on agri-science was like any other branch of current affairs, influenced by what is new, what could affect people's lives, what is scary or could be made to seem scary, what editors think and care about, as well as what is interesting, intriguing or fires the imagination. Clearly food and agriculture could readily be made to fit that agenda, with farming covering three-quarters of our land area, producing the food we eat, and with plenty of scare stories in recent years.

In a competitive news environment, journalists and news editors also had to tailor their coverage to the beliefs, interests and inclinations of their audience – a preoccupation shared by food retailers who could not go out on a limb or against the grain of public attitudes.

TH considered that a defining feature of (vulnerable) public attitudes in relation to food and farming was a fairly obsessive worship of the natural, which ran counter to a welcoming of science within agriculture. Consumers were instinctively suspicious of human intervention – human ingenuity was the unmentionable ingredient in our food, eg the discovery of a cancer-fighting, life-extending super-broccoli growing naturally on a Chilean mountain would be greeted with celebration, whereas if produced through scientific intervention would be viewed with suspicion.

TH viewed this mistrust of ingenuity in our food as absurd. The discovery of cooking was one of the first human interventions in food, and it would not be possible today to survive on a raw diet without the use of cooking.

This innate suspicion of human interference with food was also fuelled by farming-related issues such as BSE and concern over certain practices within the food processing industry, as well as a sense of fear about mankind's power over the planet and its food production systems.

The journalistic result of this was that any technological advance in food or farming instinctively led reporters to look for the down-side – unlike innovations in other areas, eg telecommunications or medicine. Perhaps this was not surprising given the importance of the food we consume and the potential impact of new farming practices on our landscape and environment rather than on a factory or warehouse.

TH suggested there was a real difference between scientific advances in medicine as opposed to food and agriculture. Largely it was believed that food is delivered by nature, and medicine is delivered by man. The closer food could appear to its wild, hunter-gatherer state the better, hence the positive connotation associated with terms such as natural, outdoor-bred and free range.

At the same time, TH noted that there was fierce price competition in relation to food, bringing a tension between the reality of low-cost, high-output food production systems and the image consumers have of how their food is produced – eg dairy farmer keeping cows indoors to meet retailers' price demands vs consumer expectations of cows grazing outside.

TH suggested that the other factor which might influence consumer attitudes would be a genuine shortage of food. There had been an inkling of this in 2008 with the global food price spike and the challenges identified in Foresight of a rising population, wealthier Asians and a move to meat, and climate change all driving a food security crisis. But developments in food production and food prices since then had not borne out the Foresight narrative, with good harvests and falling prices around the world posing genuine questions over what is the trend and what is the blip in terms of global food supply. TH also considered that the situation was potentially more complex than the Foresight narrative suggested, with large areas of under-utilised land, over-consumption and wastage of food all providing alternative opportunities to improve the supply/demand balance.

While public attitudes towards hi-tech agriculture were changing only slowly and at the margins, TH considered that media reporting of agri-science had become more balanced, with less hostility towards issues such as GM than 15 or so years ago. This was in part due to the fact that GM crops had now been widely grown and consumed for almost 20 years without the health or environmental apocalypse predicted by the technology's detractors.

While pressure groups remained firmly opposed, there was a noticeable shift in the grounds of opposition towards a fear of corporate control of the food chain. Nevertheless, TH suggested that environmental NGOs would continue to maintain a narrative of peril around hi-tech changes within agriculture.

Contentment among the middle classes with the current choice and affordability of food would continue to underpin a certain conservatism among consumers – why embrace something new with no direct benefit to them? If the farming industry really wanted the public to embrace the changes that agri-science might bring, it would require either a genuine threat to the global food supply, a major contribution to environmental improvement, or a real advance in healthier food – eg the allergy-free peanut might be the kind of bell-weather breakthrough to shift public opinion.

Without those kind of advances TH concluded that it would be difficult to change the climate of public opinion on hi-tech agriculture.

Andrew Opie, Food Policy Director, British Retail Consortium

Andrew Opie (AO) cautioned against viewing consumers as a homogenous group, but as a starting point suggested that most consumers' understanding of modern agriculture was

generally very limited. That did not mean, however, that consumers do not care about how their food is produced - they trust and expect farmers, food processors and retailers to produce their food safely and sustainably.

According to AO, innovative farming practices would not necessarily be front of mind for consumers visiting the supermarket, although they would be likely to take an interest in broader issues of how agri-food innovation could be used to tackle climate change, food waste and sustainability – again expecting the retailer or manufacturer to address these challenges on their behalf.

AO suggested that consumers were not opposed to innovation in food *per se*, and there were some good examples of consumer-facing advances, such as livestock products with higher levels of beneficial Omega-3 oils delivered through the animal feed. Ultimately consumers wanted to see innovation which offered direct benefits to them.

AO noted that some issues of agri-food innovation were inherently more challenging than others, such as GM technology, whose benefits had not been sold effectively to consumers. While GM foods appeared to be a departure from the existing products shoppers were familiar and comfortable with, the arguments presented in support of GM, such as food security, were often quite distant from consumers. But AO suggested that consumers more readily accepted the use of technology and innovation in the production process rather than in the final product – eg use of GM in animal feed.

Regular FSA surveys of trends in consumer opinion about food indicated that there were some practices or technologies which simply did not resonate well with consumers – eg cloning. Similarly, retailers were nervous about a possible return to feeding processed animal protein given the historical baggage with BSE and the likely response from consumers.

AO suggested that the media also played a key role in shaping consumer opinion in this area – much of the media coverage around food and health issues was sensational and not well-balanced.

Turning to what could be done to improve public support for agri-science, it was important to understand that today's busy consumers had relatively little knowledge or interest in researching these issues in detail – highlighting the need to communicate in terms people would readily understand and associate with. Independent, trustworthy sources of information were critical, capable of standing up to media scrutiny. AO suggested that the growth of social media might also help to cut through some of the more traditional media communication routes and gain traction more quickly.

In relation to GM, AO suggested that novel breeding processes such as gene editing might prove more acceptable to consumers than transgenic techniques.

In conclusion, AO suggested that the fact consumers are not constantly asking questions about how farmers are producing their food was actually positive, suggesting a high level of trust and confidence in what British farmers do.

4. Questions and Discussion

The following key points arose during discussion:

In response to a question from Lord Selborne about the role of social media, TH cautioned against relying on outlets such as Twitter and Facebook for a sensible debate on hi-tech agriculture. However, AO suggested that social media did have a role in improving

transparency across the food supply chain and opening industry up to greater scrutiny and challenge on issues such as ethical labour and environmental sustainability.

TH pointed out that most of the major newspapers had lost their dedicated farming correspondents, and that agricultural issues were now covered through the prism of science or environment reporting.

Lord Taverne suggested that the supermarkets could take a lead on the GM issue by dropping GM-free claims - not only was GM-free impossible to guarantee it also implied that GM was dangerous and to be avoided. AO said he was not aware of any UK retailers promoting GM-free claims, adding that when a number of the major supermarkets removed their non-GM feed requirements from poultry suppliers there was no significant back-lash from consumers.

Lord Taverne also asked about action taken in response to Prof Steve Jones' report on BBC coverage of science. TH said the BBC had worked with the Science Media Centre to develop guidance on science reporting in five or six key areas, including climate change and biotechnology.

Lord Haskins pointed to a profound loss of trust in institutions and authorities – eg food industry, farmers, Church, BBC – which had been filled to some extent by ill-informed and unaccountable NGOs. As a result society appeared to have lost the ability to manage risk. In relation to agriculture, he noted that people appeared to be more comfortable with engineering applications than genetics. TH agreed, adding that anti-GM activists also appeared to maintain a totemic opposition to all new breeding techniques such as gene editing, which were not technically GM. He expressed concern that some of these techniques were at risk of being undermined before they became established simply through association with GM.

Lord Curry expressed a greater sense of optimism about the improvement in public attitudes towards science in agriculture compared with 20 years ago, when consumers lost trust in the food chain over issues such as BSE and BST, and the introduction of GM without proper explanation. He suggested that consumers were beginning to realise that scientific innovation is essential to maintain choice and affordability in our food. He backed a public debate on the reintroduction of pigswill and meat and bone meal which had been lost due to a failure to apply control systems properly. However, TH echoed AO's concerns about the consumer perception problems of feeding MBM back to livestock, adding that most UK pig producers did not want to see it re-introduced.

Prof David Leaver suggested that journalists in particular had a responsibility in terms of science reporting, noting that the media was strongly influenced by anti-science NGOs. This not only shaped public opinion, but also the decisions of politicians – as reflected in the development of unreasonable and unworkable regulatory standards based on emotional judgements rather than scientific evidence. TH accepted that there were some journalists with an agenda on issues such as GM, but in general considered that it was not the media shaping the debate. The reality was that consumers did not care enough about whether GM would help the environment or improve global food security to move out of their comfort zone.

Richard Whitlock suggested that individuals should take greater control of issues affecting their lives – eg obesity - rather than delegating responsibility. However, in response to TH suggesting it was not the media making the weather on these issues, he highlighted the damage caused by campaigning journalists using emotive and sensational language – eg mad cow disease and Frankenfoods were not terms used by the farming or food industry.

Barry Hackett expressed concern at the general sense of complacency over our future food supply and whether consumers were bothered or not about how their food was produced. It was absolutely imperative to make people care, to make farmers the story, because the day queues formed at the bakers it would be too late. There was clearly an urgent need to tell a better story or find a different way to make people understand about food security. AO responded that it was not that consumers didn't care about farming practices – evidenced by the growth in free-range and outdoor reared production – but more that they did not have agricultural technology front of mind.

Neil Hipps asked whether the mainstream media was seeking to drive or reflect public opinion. TH responded that it could be both – the media wants to be heard and to inform, but it is also competing with other news outlets so to some extent has to tell people what they want to hear or they will go elsewhere.

OA noted that public opinion was often influenced by price, and that there could be a difference between public attitudes as portrayed in the media as opposed to consumers' purchasing decisions in the shops. It was also important not to under-estimate the robustness of consumers in the face of food scares, as reflected in the resilience of UK poultry meat sales following the Avian Influenza outbreak.

Lydia Smith of NIAB agreed with Lord Curry that the momentum was building behind greater acceptance of new technologies in agriculture, and suggested that statutory bodies such as the Food Standards Agency could be used as trusted and independent sources of information to communicate these new innovations and applications.

Matina Tsalavouta considered that agricultural scientists today were also much better equipped and confident to talk to the public about their research, and that this provided an important platform to improve trust and understanding among consumers.

Jack Ward suggested that with just a matter of weeks to go before the submission of bids for Innovation Centres under the Government's Agri-Tech Strategy, serious consideration should be given to the establishment of a specific centre focused on public communication of agri-science.

This suggestion was supported by Tom Heap, who noted that there were good examples of pioneering UK agricultural research being very well received by the general public, such as the 'superwheat' research taking place at NIAB to improve modern wheat yields and resilience by recreating the original chance hybridisation event which produced the modern wheat plant.

Concluding the meeting, Mark Spencer MP thanked guest speakers, Members and stakeholders for their contribution to a lively and thought-provoking discussion which would help shape the Group's ongoing programme of work in this area.