

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science & Technology in Agriculture

**Notes of the fifth Annual General Meeting held on Tuesday 17 December 2013,
Committee Room 12, Palace of Westminster**

GM crops - time for a fresh approach?

Present:

Members

George Freeman MP (Chair)
Earl of Selborne
Earl of Lindsay
Lord Cameron of Dillington
Lord Palmer
Lord Curry of Kirkharle
Lord Erroll
Viscount Ridley
Jim Clark (pp Huw Irranca-Davies MP)

Guest Speaker

Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

Stakeholders

Nick von Westenholz, CPA; Calum Murray, TSB; Paul Rooke, AIC; John Ford, AIC; Verity Kirkpatrick, GO Science; Andrew Marshall, abc; David Hill, Norfolk farmer/NFU; Neil Hipps; John Young, BASF; David Leaver, BIAC; Chris Atkinson, University of Greenwich; Martin Livermore, Scientific Alliance; Hugh Oliver-Bellasis, GWCT; Penny Maplestone, BSPB; Chris Green, Senova; Edward Barker, CLA; Barry Hackett, Farmwise; Graham Jellis, BCPC; Dave Hughes, Syngenta; Jennifer Wilson, USDA; Mike Rowe, Defra; Andrew Kuyk, FDF; Richard Whitlock, OFC; John Bingham, retired plant breeder; Penny Bramwell, Defra; Rosie Hamer, Defra; Duncan Barker, DfID; Malcolm Hawkesford, Rothamsted Research; Caroline Fenwick, BIS; Geoff Dodgson, Ware Anthony Rust; Martin Collison, Collison Associates; Mike Bevan, John Innes Centre; Adam Speed, CPA; Clare Wenner, AB Sugar; Nigel Kerby, Mylnefield Research Services; Claire Urry, China-Britain Business Council; Jim Godfrey, TSB; Anthony Keeling, Elsoms Seeds; Roger Keeling, Elsoms Seeds; Fay Jones, NFU; Oliver Savory, NFU; Dale Sanders, John Innes Centre; Peter Gregory, East Malling Research; Andy Richardson, Volac; Ian Munnery, SESVanderHave; Daniel Pearsall, Group Co-ordinator

AGM

1. Election of Chair and Officers

All Members present agreed that the Group should continue to exist and operate as an approved All-Party Group within Parliament.

The nomination of George Freeman MP to continue as Chair of the Group was approved by all Members present.

Nominations for the Earl of Selborne, Lord Haskins, Mark Spencer MP, Huw Irranca-Davies MP and Roger Williams MP to continue as Vice-Chairs of the Group were approved with the agreement of all Members present.

2. Welcome & Introduction

As newly re-elected chairman, George Freeman (GF) welcomed Members and stakeholders to the fifth Annual General Meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, noting that it had been a busy year for the Group and the subject.

In particular, 2013 saw the launch of the Agri-Tech Strategy as part of the Government's wider Industrial Strategy, signalling a renewed emphasis on the role of scientific innovation in agriculture and food production as a major driver of long-term economic growth and inward investment – alongside aerospace, the automotive industry and the life sciences sector.

GF paid tribute to science minister David Willetts for his foresight in recognising the emerging global opportunities for agri-science. The Strategy marking the first time in more than 30 years that agriculture had been recognised in such a way, with cross-departmental support galvanised across Government from BIS, Defra, DfID the Treasury and Number 10.

Lord Cameron of Dillington also thanked George Freeman as chair of the All-Party Group for his own personal efforts and contribution in raising the profile of this issue and helping to make the Agri-Tech Strategy happen, a view supported by other Officers and Members of the Group.

GF thanked Lord Cameron, adding that the work of the All-Party Group and its contribution in shaping the thinking behind the Agri-Tech Strategy had been directly recognised by the Ministers involved, and indeed the Group had been delighted to host the Parliamentary launch of the Strategy back in September.

GF highlighted the three key components of the Strategy – the £60m Agri-Tech Catalyst Fund already open to applications, the establishment of a new Centre for Agricultural Informatics and Sustainability Metrics, and plans for a national network of industry-led Centres for Agricultural Innovation.

In particular, GF drew attention to the All-Party Group's key role in championing the subject of informatics and metrics to help transform the debate around agricultural technology and innovation from an emotive subject to one driven by scientific data and evidence.

GF noted that not many All-Party Group's could claim to have contributed with such impact to the development of Government policy, although a lot more work remained to be done to ensure the Strategy delivered in practice. A key challenge for the Agri-Tech Strategy was to secure public and media support and engagement, and to align the Strategy's outputs in terms of sustainably produced food with the needs and interests of consumers.

Supporting the Agri-Tech Strategy's implementation would therefore be a key focus for the Group over the coming year. GF also invited Members and Stakeholders to suggest other topics for the Group's work programme via co-ordinator Daniel Pearsall.

In GF's absence to vote in the House of Commons, Lord Selborne chaired a brief discussion of possible themes for the All-Party Group to address over the coming year. These included:

- Public engagement and understanding – how to build a better appreciation of the everyday contribution of agri-science: suggested speakers included Government

chief scientist Sir Mark Walport, environmentalist Mark Lynas, and/or a marketing professional from outside the food and farming sector;

- The role of intellectual property in agriculture (potential joint meeting with the APPG on IP);
- International application of UK agricultural science, research, training and skills (potential joint meeting with the APPG on Agriculture for Development);
- How the Agri-Tech Strategy can help boost UK exports, in terms of both products and knowledge;
- An EU perspective on agricultural science and innovation, with EU chief scientist Professor Anne Glover suggested as a possible speaker.

3. Guest speaker

Rt Hon Owen Paterson, Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

[Please note that a full copy of Owen Paterson's presentation is available to download via the Meetings section of the All-Party Group web-site at www.appg-agscience.org.uk]

Owen Paterson (OP) opened his presentation by paying tribute to the work of the All-Party Group and to GF as chair in providing a proper forum for expert debate on agri-science issues.

Emphasising the importance of agricultural innovation, OP highlighted the contribution of eminent scientists such as Norman Borlaug in raising productivity, noting that if the world tried to support today's population using the production techniques of the 1950s, instead of farming 38% of all land it would require 82% of all land.

He reiterated the need for a second Green Revolution in agriculture to address the global challenges of population growth, climate change and sustainable resource use. He flagged the UK government's renewed recognition, through the Agri-Tech Strategy, of the importance of agriculture science and innovation.

The Strategy's central objective was to help translate the outputs of the UK's world-class science base into the next generation of technologies, products and practices which would support the 'sustainable intensification' of UK and global agriculture at a time of rapid international expansion and investment in primary production.

OP expressed his conviction that GM would be one of the technologies needed to realise the Strategy's objectives.

Reviewing key developments on GM since his speech at Rothamsted six months ago, he highlighted:

- A report in June from the European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC) warning of the grave scientific, economic and social consequences of current EU policy on GM crops;
- The trashing by GM activists of Golden Rice trials in the Philippines;

- A European Court ruling in September which found the EU Commission guilty of unnecessary delays in processing Pioneer's application to grow insect resistance GM maize 1507;
- On World Food Day in October, a coalition of scientists and EU farmers' organisations highlighting the damaging effects of the EU's stance on GM and calling for a more science-based approach;
- Retraction by a scientific journal of the Seralini rat-feeding study in November.

He noted that the European Commission had since asked EU Member States to approve Pioneer's 1507 GM maize, and to reconsider stalled proposals on the nationalisation of cultivation decisions, adding that all eyes were now on the incoming Greek EU Presidency to see how they intend to handle these GM issues.

Mr Paterson suggested that there was no better time to talk about GM, with farmers, scientists and even some sections of the media calling for a fresh approach to the technology.

He also highlighted the symbolic as well as practical risks of failing to adopt a science-based approach on GM, in terms of denying access to the potential benefits offered by new plant breeding techniques and other innovative technologies, warning that intellectual and commercial capacity in biotechnology was already leaving Europe.

He concluded by saying that it was time to reverse that trend and capitalise on the UK's scientific expertise. He called on like-minded supporters of the technology to maintain the positive momentum of the debate to help change the economic and political climate around GM and give farmers access to all the tools and technologies available to meet the global challenges of food security and sustainable intensification.

4. Questions and discussion

The following key points arose during discussion:

In response to a question from George Freeman about the status of public opinion in the UK, Mr Paterson pointed to the muted public and media reaction to UK retailers announcing a switch to GM feed in poultry earlier in the year, suggesting that public hostility was softening and that British consumers were aware (and quite relaxed) that they were eating meat and livestock products from GM-fed animals.

He also suggested that the evidence of environmental benefits was increasing, alongside the potential of humanitarian applications such as vitamin-A enriched Golden Rice (he condemned the recent vandalism of Golden Rice field trials in the Philippines as 'extraordinarily wicked').

Lord Cameron asked whether GM testing procedures in the UK were fit for purpose. OP defended the EU's regulatory framework for GMOs as rigorous and science-based, noting that the process only broke down at the political level where witchcraft was re-imposed and scientific evidence ignored.

Dave Hughes of Syngenta highlighted a recent report indicating that of \$6.7bn invested globally in crop protection research last year, 7% was focused on the development of technologies for European agriculture, down from 25% in 1995. This was a clear example of regulation stifling innovation, and he asked what could be done to avoid making the same mistakes as GM for the next technologies coming through.

OP agreed that there was a real danger of Europe falling further behind, pointing to the recently-imposed EU restrictions on neonicotinoids as an example of scientific evidence being ignored. When such products cost £300m and 12 years to develop only to find they could be withdrawn on a whim, it was hardly surprising that R&D based crop protection companies were questioning their investment in Europe.

He also expressed regret that BASF had scrapped plans to develop GM blight resistant potatoes for the European market, highlighting the potential benefits of such research and warning that Europe risked becoming the museum of world farming if it did not wake up to the realities of the current situation.

Dave Hughes added that the real effects of collapsing investment would not become apparent for 10 years, prompting OP to highlight his ambition to establish England as the European hub of advanced agricultural technology.

Mike Bevan of the John Innes Centre agreed that GM presented enormous opportunities, but suggested taking a fresh approach based not on GM technology *per se* but rather on the goal of sustainable intensification and the available tools and technologies required to deliver that objective. Such an approach might enable the discussion to focus on traits and applications of relevance to consumers, and to move on from the current sterile debate which offered little prospect of genuine dialogue and in which the technology was seen as a vehicle for vested corporate interests to gain greater control over the food chain.

OP suggested part of the problem was the stalled political situation in Europe, but reiterated his view that the public debate on GM had moved on. He stressed the potentially damaging effect in developing countries of GM opposition from multi-millionaire 'eco-toffs' in industrialised countries, emphasising the importance of public sector GM research in countries such as Kenya to develop more resilient, locally-adapted strains of cassava and plantain.

Lord Curry asked what was needed to encourage farmers to produce more, suggesting that productivity in many UK sectors had gone backwards since UK self-sufficiency had peaked in the 1980s on the back of guaranteed CAP intervention buying. He stressed the importance of opening up sustainable new global market opportunities for UK producers.

OP agreed that declining UK self-sufficiency presented opportunities to for home-grown production, as did the significant new markets opening up in countries like China. But the UK needed to back its food and farming industries to gain a stake in a dynamic world market.

Richard Whitlock suggested that an alternative approach on GM would be to promote labelling of livestock products fed on imported GM material and already on supermarket shelves. This may help to de-sensitise wary consumers and may be an easier mountain to climb than pushing for GM crops to be grown on UK farms at this stage.

OP considered that both approaches were worth pursuing and not mutually exclusive, reiterating the strong case behind the technology's safety and widespread use.

Asked whether food retailers and manufacturers should be doing more to move the GM debate, OP considered that it would be tough to expect one retailer to take a lead on the issue and that actually the collective position taken by retailers, eg in relation to restoring GM in poultry rations, was generally helpful.

Finally, Mr Paterson suggested that it was time to stop talking about GM crops as something novel and untested – pointing to the scale of the technology's adoption as an accepted and established part of mainstream global agriculture. He urged supporters of the technology to

take every opportunity to counter the myths and misinformation spread about GM in the media and by campaign groups.

Concluding the meeting, GF thanked the Secretary of State on behalf of the All-Party Group for his presentation and for his political leadership on the agri-tech issue.

Highlighting the critical importance of innovation and the application of science as the foundation for economic and societal progress, GF pointed to the political and regulatory barriers facing new agricultural technologies at an EU level and the pressing need to make agri-science valued by and relevant to the media and public at large as key challenges facing the sector.