All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science & Technology in Agriculture

Impact of the global food security crisis on consumer and media attitudes to food science

Wednesday 14 September 2011, 5.00 – 6.30pm,
Committee Room 10, Palace of Westminster

Present:

Members
Lord Cameron of Dillington
Lord Boswell of Aynho
Mark Spencer MP

Speakers
Giles Shapley, Network Research
Fiona Fox, Science Media Centre

Stakeholders
Chris Atkinson, East Malling Research; Neil Hipps, East Malling Research; Martin Savage, nabim; Catherine Lehane, nabim; Kate Bevilaqua, Embassy of Brazil; Robert W Daniels, Scotts Miracle Gro; Edward Wild, Wild Search; Heather Jenkins, Waitrose; Wayne Powell, IBERS; Tony Pexton, NIAB; Tina Barsby, NIAB; Robin Upton, Farmer; Gavin Milligan, Royal Society of Chemistry; Matt Keirle, Agricultural Biotechnology Council; Chris Warkup, Biosciences KTN; Stephen Humphreys, Food Standards Agency; Geoff Dodgson, Chamberlain WAR; Prof Tony Allan, KCL; Sarah Pettitt, NFU; Richard Whitlock, Richard Whitlock Ltd; Hugh Oliver-Bellasis, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust; Sian Thomas, Fresh Produce Consortium; Julian Little, Bayer; Stephen Humphreys, Bayer; Jim Orson, BCPC; Jonathan Wentworth, POST; Dominic Dyer, CPA; Wendy Gray, CPA; Gemma Burns, Informa Life Sciences; David Leaver, BIAC; Rob Simpson, BASIS; Lizzie Sayer, Westminster Food & Nutrition Forum; Caroline Drummond, LEAF; Andrea Graham, NFU; Joann Hipperson, Sainsburys; Dominic Goudie, FDF; Daniel Pearsall, Group Co-ordinator

1. Welcome & Introduction
Taking the chair, Group Co-ordinator Daniel Pearsall (DP) passed on apologies from George Freeman MP who had been unavoidably detained in the Chamber. DP welcomed the strong turnout from members and stakeholders, and introduced the topic for discussion – the impact of global food security concerns on consumer and media attitudes to food science. He introduced both speakers, and invited Giles Shapley of Network Research to present the key findings of a shopper survey commissioned by the Crop Protection Association.

2. Guest Speakers:

Giles Shapley, Network Research

[Please note that full copies of speakers' slide presentations are available to download via the Meetings section of the All-Party Group web-site at www.appg-agscience.org.uk]

Introducing the key findings of a consumer survey conducted among a representative sample of 1009 GB shoppers in May 2011, Giles Shapley (GS) explained that the research had focused on three key areas:

- How rising food prices and the current economic crisis were affecting food shopping behaviour and decisions;
- Consumers' awareness and concerns relating to global food security;
- Shoppers' attitudes to the use of science in food production.

GS presented key findings of the research as follows:

Attitudes to shopping

- The average shopper spends £66.80 per week on household food shopping, with most conducting one main shop per week with some top up shopping;
- Over two-thirds (69%) of shoppers believe their current food shopping bill is more expensive than 12 months ago, with increases seen across all food categories;
- In the past 12 months, most shoppers have become more conscious of how much they spend (78%), are buying fewer food luxuries (61%) and believe reducing food waste is more important (63%);
- The vast majority are taking more advantage of special offers (78%), and a greater proportion are also buying supermarket value lines than 12 months ago (58%);
- Many shoppers (38%) are reducing other areas of household expenditure to meet food bills, while just under two-thirds (62%) agreed that food shopping accounts for a greater share of household expenditure;
- More than half prefer to buy British (58%), slightly fewer expressed a preference for locally sourced food (53%), while two in five said they preferred to buy from Fairtrade sources (41%);
- Over two-thirds of shoppers want to buy food from sustainable sources (68%), but more than four in five think organic food is too expensive (82%).

Awareness of global food security concerns

- Consistently more than half of all respondents were 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about the potential impact of the following global factors on future food security:
    - Global population growth (54%)
    - Impact of climate change (56%)
    - Natural disasters (54%)
    - Global fresh water supplies (54%)
    - Security of global energy supplies (60%)
    - Threat of global terrorism (58%)
- Responses to these factors were not uniform across the same groups of respondents, with 27% expressing concern about all factors;
- There was strong recognition among respondents of the global factors affecting food costs and availability, from rising oil prices (82%) and increased global demand (70%) to climate change (60%) and a growing world population (49%);
- Almost two-thirds (64%) agreed that the era of cheap food was over, while 78% of respondents believed the UK should become more self-sufficient in food production;
- Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) think the Government should be doing more to prevent further increases in the cost of food.

Attitudes to food science

- The majority of shoppers (55%) believe science in food production is positive and should be exploited fully to meet future demand;
- Most consumers (59%) believe Government should take the lead in determining how science is used in food production;
- Increasing food production to meet the world's needs is also seen as a Government responsibility by most respondents (59%);
- Two-thirds of shoppers (67%) believe supermarkets should do more to explain where food comes from and how it is produced;
- More than a third of respondents (35%) believe GM foods should be allowed to be sold in the UK – this proportion increased if GM foods could be shown to deliver on lower prices (37%), nutrition (44%) and environmental safety (46%);
- Pesticides are seen as essential to protect crops by 42% of shoppers, although fewer expressed confidence in the current controls (34%) and use (32%) of pesticides in UK food production;
- Government was seen as having lead responsibility for the introduction of new scientific developments in the food chain by 39% of shoppers.

In conclusion, GS noted that in response to rising food prices, UK consumers were changing their shopping habits to balance the household budget, targeting more promotions and value lines, buying fewer luxury items, and reducing other areas of expenditure.

Consumers were also becoming more informed and concerned about the global factors affecting current food prices and the security of food supply for future generations. Consistently more than half of shoppers were worried about the impact of issues such as climate change, population growth, water and energy supplies on the future availability and affordability of food.

According to the survey, most shoppers agreed that the era of cheap food had come to an end, and wanted the UK to become more self-sufficient in food production. Three-quarters of respondents thought the Government should be doing more to prevent further increases in the cost of food. Equally they expected retailers to do more to explain how food is produced.

Shoppers were polarised in their opinions over food science in the food chain. Whereas most agreed that science should be applied to help boost food output and keep prices down, a sizeable minority sought greater controls and assurances on the use of specific technologies such as GM and pesticides.

During questions, GS confirmed that the responses to the survey had not been 'sense-checked' to gauge the level of understanding among respondents, and the findings therefore reflected opinion rather than informed opinion.

Stephen Humphreys of the Food Standards Agency confirmed that the FSA's own consumer tracker surveys reflected a steady decline in concern over GM food issues.

GS suggested that while many of the survey's findings were in line with expectations, possibly the most surprising aspect of the research was the strong connection consumers made between the rising cost of food and the impact of global factors such as population growth, climate change and rising oil prices.

Fiona Fox, Director, Science Media Centre
Fiona Fox (FF) introduced the Science Media Centre as a press office for science when scientific issues hit the headlines.

The concept of the Science Media Centre stemmed from a House of Lords Committee inquiry into Science and Society whose report, published in 2000, recommended that a new initiative be set up to help the scientific community engage more effectively in media debates on controversial scientific issues such as MMR and autism, BSE and GM crops, which were typically dominated by the views of NGOs and politicians.

While scientists frequently blamed the media for inaccurate or unbalanced reporting, FF noted that there had been no concerted attempt by scientists to present their views directly to the media.

The Science Media Centre (SMC) was established in April 2002, alongside a poll showing that 90% of the general public get most of their information about science from the media. Its work is funded by more than 80 organisations, including scientific institutions and universities, science-based companies, media organisations and government bodies with an interest in science.

To maintain independence from funders, FF noted that donations were capped at 5% of the Centre's running costs.

FF explained the principles underpinning the SMC's activities, which were to ensure policy decisions and public debate were informed by accurate, evidence-based scientific information in the news media, delivered by making it easier for journalists to access the best science, and to help scientists engage with the media when stories hit the headlines.

The main strategies of the SMC were firstly to offer a rapid response service to breaking news stories, with around 3000 scientific experts available on the SMC's database to provide comment on relevant issues, and secondly to help scientists set the agenda by organising and hosting a series of media briefings on specific themes or developments. Typically these briefings would attract between 10 and 20 journalists from the national print and broadcast media.

FF provided examples of successful media briefings held by the Science Media Centre on issues relevant to the APPG, including:

- the launch of multi-million pound EU research programme to grow pharmaceuticals in crops (2004);
- a focus on UK-based research taking place to help mitigate the effect of farming on climate change (2007);
- publication of an ACRE report highlighting the need for more balanced regulation of the environmental impacts of GM crops relative to other farming systems (2006);
- an opportunity to meet the 'giants of plant science' (2011);
- a background briefing on the measures needed to protect GM trials sites from vandalism (2008);
- focus on the potential impact on food and farming of proposed new EU rules on pesticide approvals (2008);
- developments taking place using GM techniques to boost the Omega-3 content of food crops (2007);
- UK-based research taking place to genetically modify chickens to prevent the spread of bird flu (2011);
- media launch of the UK government's Foresight report on Global Food and Farming Futures (2011);

FF pointed out that the briefings, which took place between 10.30 and 11.30am to accommodate journalists' deadlines, were always balanced in discussing the potential risks as well as the potential benefits of the scientific developments under discussion. This was vital to maintain the credibility of SMC among science correspondents as an authoritative and independent source of evidence-based information.

FF also highlighted examples of rapid reactions organised by the Science Media Centre to ensure the voice of scientists was reported in breaking stories. These included:

- the release of statements by leading plant scientists in response to Prince Charles warning of a global catastrophe caused by GM crops (2008);
- expert reaction to the publication of research into genetically modified, salt tolerant plants (2009);
- expert scientific comment on the news of a foot and mouth outbreak in the UK (2007).

Overall, FF concluded that most news outlets were now equipped and willing to ensure their coverage of science-related stories was balanced and accurate – but there was no room for complacency and many scientists remained to be persuaded of the value of engaging with the media to get their voice heard.

Questions & Discussion

The following key points and questions were raised during a panel discussion between speakers, members and stakeholders:

Pof Tony Allan, KCL (water scientist) – viewed from inside science, there was no incentive to communicate with or learn the language register of the media. FF noted that the SMC still encountered concern among some scientists that misreporting by the media would lead to subsequent criticism from fellow scientists.

Dominic Dyer, CPA – praised the efforts of SMC to ensure more balanced mainstream coverage of science in the UK media, and asked whether there were any plans to develop a similar initiative at an EU level where there was a vacuum in science-based information and decision-making. FF responded that the Science Media Centre would not divert its focus away from the news media – ie towards MPs or MEPs – but there was certainly scope to develop a Europe-wide science media resource.

Mark Spencer MP – indicated that MPs were not the problem in relation to issues such as GM food, since they would follow public opinion. He suggested that the major obstacle were the supermarkets who were failing to show leadership and provide choice to consumers.

Giles Shapley suggested that the supermarkets simply responded to consumer demand, although Chris Warkup, Biosciences KTN, considered that there was active denial of choice.

While FF maintained that in her experience most scientists were willing to discuss their research openly with the media, High Oliver-Bellasis considered that there was still a strong reticence among agricultural scientists to communicate the benefits of their research, and he asked where the leadership on this issue was coming from.

Prof Wayne Powell, IBERS - suggested that the requirement placed by research funders on scientists to demonstrate the impact of their research would help address this issue.

Sarah Pettitt, NFU – noted that the shopper survey report pointed to consumer perception of increased prices across all food categories, including fruit and vegetables. From a grower perspective, food price inflation at the retail level was not consistent with the continued erosion of farm-gate prices paid to producers.

Julian Little, Bayer – highlighted the important role of the Science Media Centre not in forcing scientists to talk to the media but in identifying good and willing communicators within the scientific community, providing them with training and opportunities to engage. In relation to GM he suggested that it was not a question of waiting for consumers to demand the technology, but of making GM products relevant to consumers, eg benefits of blight-tolerant potato.

Robin Upton – agreed that the GM blight tolerant potato offered a perfect example of a product whose benefits, in terms of reduced sprays and emissions, coincided exactly with the concerns and expectations of retailers and their consumers.

Dominic Dyer, CPA – suggested that organic producers stood to benefit from such developments just as much as conventional producers, but highlighted the ludicrous situation currently facing GM research in the EU which meant that small-scale trial sites had to be protected from sabotage by security guards, razor wire, alarm systems and CCTV.

Tonty Pexton, NIAB – considered that politicians should not simply reflect the views of constituents, as Mark Spencer had suggested, but had a key role and responsibility to lead an evidence-based public debate.

Caroline Drummond, LEAF – indicated that a key issue among consumers was a general lack of trust in science – this was reflected in the policies of food retailers. Furthermore, she noted that a lot of regulation in this area, especially at EU level, was not based on science.

FF – considered that the lack of trust in scientists was over-exaggerated, and that scientists routinely topped opinion polls of public trust, beaten only by GPs. In relation to GM, there was now a strong body of scientific evidence confirming that currently available GM products were safe to eat and safe for the environment, but whose responsibility was it to persuade the media of the benefits of GM? Or should the onus now lie with opponents of the technology to provide the scientific evidence of lack of safety?

Chris Warkup – suggested that many stories were simply not being told, for example the economic and health benefits of GM cotton production, yet few consumers would know they were wearing clothes produced from GM cotton.

Richard Whitlock – highlighted the impact of Prof Brian Cox as a young, charismatic ex-rock star in bringing the physical sciences to a wider audience, and asked whether plant science needed similar personalities to bring the subject to life.

David Leaver, BIAC – observed how frequently the benefits and advances of medical science were covered on the national news in comparison with food or agricultural science, and asked how that imbalance could be addressed in view of the pressing concerns over issues such as food security and food price inflation.

Heather Jenkins, Waitose – noted that the debate had focused almost exclusively on GM technology when this was just one of the tools needed to improve the productivity and sustainability of food production. She questioned whether the discussion was concerned with food security at a global or national level, asking whether GM really was the panacea and why people got so worked up about it. From a Waitrose perspective, she noted that no one

had ever turned up at her door wanting to explain the technology and its benefits, and as a retailer they needed help in explaining the technology and to understand if it could be promoted and defended to consumers.

Sarah Pettitt, NFU – concluded the session by noting that the discussion had focused on whose responsibility it was to persuade the media and the public of the benefits of agricultural science and technology, and GM in particular. Ultimately this would require a collective and concerted effort by a range of different stakeholders, but she highlighted the Food Standards Agency, as an independent body with a proven track record of communicating with the public, as one organisation capable of taking the lead in this area.