

# Balancing the debate

By Mark Spencer

The politicising of agri-science decision-making is dangerous and should be avoided if we are to meet the food production targets of a growing global population

The role of science and technology has always been important in farming, but never more so than today. With 200,000 more mouths to feed every day, the balance between global food supply and demand is becoming ever more precarious. Alongside efforts to reduce waste, change diets and improve distribution, the only realistic prospect of providing enough food for a world population set to exceed nine billion by 2050 is through productivity growth.

At the same time, the potential loss of half the world's arable land over the next 40 years due to water shortages places a responsibility on countries less vulnerable to the predicted impact of climate change to maximise their agricultural potential.

Agricultural science and technology has the potential not only to increase the physical volume of output, but also to develop smarter farming methods to reduce emissions and conserve resources.

The potential for scientific innovation to transform UK and European agriculture is hugely exciting. An exploding knowledge base in biological, genetic, engineering and data science is opening up exciting new opportunities to improve our farming systems.

So, it is encouraging that, after decades of chronic underinvestment in productive agricultural research, the UK policy environment has responded so positively.

The 2013 UK agri-tech strategy sent a clear signal that Britain's food and farming industries are once again viewed as a strategically significant sector of the economy, and that renewed investment in applied agri-science and technology can help generate much-needed growth, jobs, export earnings and inward investment.

Enjoying cross-party support, this policy initiative represents the strongest



Juncker: not a fan of scientific advice

recognition by any government in more than 30 years of the importance of supporting a productive, resilient, hi-tech farming sector.

The implementation of the strategy is still at an early stage. Given the long-term nature of agricultural R&D, it is vital this renewed policy focus on applied, industry-facing research is maintained under a future government, whatever its colour, providing the framework for a truly integrated agri-science strategy connecting fundamental research right through to practical application.

But major challenges still remain. Without a more balanced and informed public debate, and without science-based regulation of agricultural innovation, key opportunities for the UK agri-food sector may be lost.

For too long, society has 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. This in turn has brought a worrying shift towards unscientific or

politically motivated regulation of agri-science, particularly at an EU level.

For example, the recent decision by the new European Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, to scrap the role of EU chief scientific adviser represents a major setback, and should serve as a wake-up call to Europe's leaders to guard against politicising agri-science decision-making if Europe's farmers are to contribute fully to the global challenges of food security and climate change.

Although the EU-28 is one of the world's major food-producing economies, and a leading centre of agricultural research, its current policies on agri-science do not reflect the pressing need to increase the productivity, resilience and resource-use efficiency of our farming systems. Continued access to scientific and technological innovation in agriculture is essential, yet EU policymakers seem intent on blocking progress in critical areas such as biotechnology and crop protection.

That is why OECD-FAO projections indicate that agricultural productivity within the EU-28 is falling behind other major global competitors, with growth of just 4 per cent projected over the next decade, compared to 40 per cent for Brazil, and 16 per cent for North America.

An ongoing challenge, therefore, and an important focus for the All-Party Group, is to understand the factors influencing public attitudes towards modern, hi-tech agriculture, and also to identify ways to develop a better understanding of the role of science and technology in improving the security, sustainability and affordability of our food supply. ●

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