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APPG meeting highlights vital role of horticultural innovation post-Brexit

Last week's meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, chaired by Julian Sturdy MP, focused on post-Brexit demand for innovation in the UK's £3 billion fresh produce sector.

Key industry figures highlighted the potential to increase British growers' share of the domestic market, and to develop export opportunities for UK research and innovation.

But faced with uncertainties over future trading arrangements, labour availability and farm support policies, speakers also underlined the need for increased R&D investment to maintain and strengthen the sector's competitiveness in an increasingly global market place.

Jack Ward, Chief Executive of the British Growers Association, said there had never been a greater need for innovative, industry-facing R&D in the fresh produce sector to improve production efficiency and meet rapidly changing consumer demands.

UK horticulture receives a very small proportion of the agricultural support funding relative to its economic significance. Although horticulture only accounts for 4% of the UK agricultural area, it delivers 25% of farm-gate sales by value. The chance to create a UK focused domestic agricultural policy could open up new opportunities for the industry to build its share of the UK fresh produce market, he said.

Roger Carline, Commercial Director at NIAB, described the innovative research taking place at East Malling Research (part of NIAB since February 2016) to improve prospects for UK soft fruit and top fruit production, and to develop the UK's rapidly expanding wine industry.

He emphasised the importance of applied research organisations such as NIAB in translating a rapidly advancing knowledge-base in genetics,

precision engineering and data science into practical innovation for British growers and an export market for UK research expertise.

Industry consultant Dr Ed Moorhouse highlighted some of the innovations already taking place at grower level to improve productivity and resource-use efficiency, with increasing use of robotics, automation, remote sensing and precision farming across the sector.

But while the fresh produce industry was used to living on its wits without high levels of market protection or taxpayer support, Dr Moorhouse warned that Brexit introduced dimension-changing uncertainties, including the potential for trade disruption through diverging standards on issues such as food safety and pesticide approvals.

He emphasised the need for well-resourced and integrated research provision from blue-sky to commercial application, including support for the UK's network of Producer Organisations whose collaborative approach to research, benchmarking and promotion was vital for industry efficiency and development.

Providing a retail perspective, Sarah Blanford, Crop and Organic Manager at Sainsbury's, highlighted the competitive nature of the food supply chain, not only within the UK but on a global basis, and the importance of innovation in product development and supply chain efficiency to meet customers' changing expectations on issues such as healthy eating, food integrity and respect for the environment.

Following the meeting, All-Party Group chair Julian Sturdy MP said:

"The UK's decision to leave the EU brings an inevitable period of flux and uncertainty over precisely what the future holds for British farmers and growers in terms of trading arrangements, regulations, support policies and access to labour."

"But our fresh produce industry is hugely resourceful and innovative. Above all, today's meeting has singled out the critical role of technology and innovation in addressing post-Brexit challenges and opportunities within the sector, and the need to re-balance horticulture's share of public sector R&D investment from historically low levels."

"As the UK develops plans for agricultural policy outside the EU, it has also highlighted the need for policy-makers to recognise the economic significance of the UK's fresh produce sector, not only in terms of ex-farm

sales but also as a major employer and supplier into the UK's £100 billion food supply chain."

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