



The Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

Agriculture and Environment
Biotechnology Commission

Tel: 020 7215 6508
Fax: 020 7215 0313
www.aebc.gov.uk

18 January 2005

Dear Margaret

BIOTECHNOLOGY COMMISSION MEMBERS' REACTION TO THE REVIEW AND THE FUTURE OF THE AEBC

At the AEBC's meeting on 9 December last year, we discussed the review of the Commission that had been published the week before. As agreed at that meeting, I am writing to summarise Commission members' views and their thoughts on the future, expressed both at the meeting and in writing after it.

No AEBC member has disagreed with the main recommendation of the review report, that the Commission should be wound up after completing its current work programme soon after the end of this financial year. There is a general feeling that the AEBC was a body created for a particular time. It has now largely discharged its remit, having had a significant influence on the UK Government's current approach to genetically modified crops. However, there is also eagerness to ensure that the legacy of the AEBC – its remit, ways of working and breadth of membership – is sustained in some way after its end. There is agreement that Government should respond to the review quickly and decisively.

While this summarises the consensus view of the Commission, many other points have been made by individual members. These relate to the conduct of the review as well as the future of the AEBC and related bodies. Commission members agreed that the latter was of primary importance, but felt that their views on the review process should also be heard.

The review

While some members were impressed by the analysis in the review of the AEBC, others had concerns. This was not a criticism of the reviewer, but of the narrow framework for such reviews, and the consequent evaluation of the AEBC as a traditional advisory committee rather than the unique and experimental body, in terms of membership and remit, that it has been. On these terms, some members felt, the review's analysis glossed over the painstaking negotiation that took place to bring together the array of views represented on the Commission in its reports, as well as the political turbulence surrounding its creation. It seemed to start from the premise that advisory bodies must meet narrow targets and restrict themselves to specific issues, and overlooked the AEBC's role as a forum for anyone who wished to engage in debate about agricultural biotechnology.

Some members also queried the report's representation of an "inherent tension in an advisor body that seeks to be both an investigative / analytic body and a stakeholder consultation / consensus forming body", and the implication that this was a disabling factor, because they believed that it was perfectly possible to balance these two roles and that *Coexistence and Liability*, as a unanimous report, had done just that. There was some feeling amongst members that the level of analysis in the review of the AEBC's reports, and the individual contribution that each had made, had been too slight.

The future

AEBC members agreed that their main focus in reacting to the review of the Commission should be on how its role and function could be transferred and sustained if it is wound up as expected. Comments on the future of strategic advice to Government on biotechnology and agriculture can be separated under four main headings.

The need to continue to consider biotechnology strategically

Whilst the political intensity of the issues has been mitigated by various factors, including the Government's announcement of policy on GM crops, the review of the AEBC points out that they have not been resolved and could come to prominence in the future. It is therefore important to continue to consider biotechnology in a strategic way, indeed perhaps to develop a positive agenda for it.

Whatever the arrangements finally chosen by Government, a number of members commented that there must continue to be a forum where the social, ethical and other issues that have been part of the AEBC's remit can be incorporated into policy formulation, and for the independence, openness and engagement with the public that have characterised its ways of working to be carried forward. One proposal is that biotechnology should be considered in synergy with other new technologies, such as nanotechnology.

Government will wish to consider whether to create a new body, with a similar remit and composition to the AEBC, that can continue to advise on biotechnology and agriculture, or to broaden the terms of reference of an existing body so as to achieve this end.

The need for agriculture as a whole to be considered more strategically

The need to find a home for strategic advice specifically on biotechnology is separate from the need, expressed by some members and also discussed in the review report, for an organisation that looks strategically at the wider context of sustainable agriculture. This is a role that the AEBC has increasingly felt itself moving towards in order to provide an appropriate context for considering biotechnology, but has been constrained in its remit. Some members have suggested that a new body with such a wider remit should be established within Defra, with appropriate arrangements for the involvement of the devolved administrations.

The need for Government to learn lessons

The AEBC was in many ways an experimental body, given a distinctive and challenging task. Several members have commented on the importance of Government learning lessons from the whole experience of the AEBC. These lessons will be of general relevance to questions of

Government policy on dealing with new technologies. It is therefore important that they are discussed and embedded across all the relevant areas of Government.

Several individual members have made practical suggestions about how any new or modified body should be organised, based on lessons learned from the AEBC. One simple but effective way to continue the legacy of the AEBC would be to recruit one or more of its former members to any body taking on aspects of its remit. It was hoped that such a body would be allowed adequate time to reflect on the vast array of views in order to succeed in its aims. Particularly it is to take on the public engagement role of the AEBC, a new or modified body would require an adequate budget. It should also work hard to build a public profile by engaging closely with the media.

On membership, some members felt that, while the full range of opinion should continue to be represented, a smaller total membership, with proportionately greater representation from the "middle ground" of opinion, would be better able to reach consensus. Some members felt that to help any new body hold the attention of the natural science community, science and scientists need to play a bigger part in any future body.

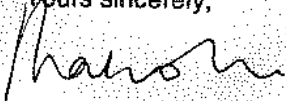
The need for any strategic body to report to all relevant parts of government

It has been pointed out that an appropriate advisory structure must be complemented by appropriate structures within Government. The broad remit of a future strategic body similar to the AEBC may require co-ordinated support from a number of divisions and/or departments if its advice is to be given the thorough consideration it deserves. Some members have suggested that, as well as making a decision on future advisory bodies, Government should also undertake a serious exercise aimed at learning about the central contribution of its own institutional practices and arrangements to problems over issues such as GM.

This letter also goes to the other Ministers to whom we report: Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry; Lewis MacDonald (Scottish Executive); Carwyn Jones (Welsh Assembly Government) and Angela Smith (Northern Ireland Office).

I hope that this summary of views proves useful to you in your decision making on the recommendations of the AEBC review.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Malcolm Grant
Chair, AEBC