

Prof. Sir John Beddington's comment: PTO for details

Sustainable Food

Jan 2009



EFRA Select Committee "Securing UK Food Supplies to 2050"

An Inquiry (started December 08) by EFRA (Environmental Food & Rural Affairs) Select Committee of MPs' looked into the challenges for the UK in securing food supplies up to 2050.

Sustainable Food Guide

The inquiry asked:

- How robust is the current UK food system? What are its main strengths and weaknesses?
- How well placed is the UK to make the most of its opportunities in responding to the challenge of increasing global food production by 50% by 2030 and doubling it by 2050, while ensuring that such production is sustainable?

EFRA REPORT Securing UK Food Supplies to 2050 (pdf)

The Inquiry concluded that the UK needs to produce "more food, more sustainably". "The UK has a moral obligation to contribute to the global challenge of securing future food supplies". "If people go hungry then political stability goes out of the window. This is a key lesson that Defra must learn from last year's food price hike when some countries ran short of food. What happened showed just how fine the line is between full supermarket shelves and empty stomachs," said Committee Chairman the Rt Hon Michael Jack MP."

Related Parliamentary Processes

Evidence

Agric R&D in UK House of Lords debate

Written Evidence to Committee (all 70 Memoranda from CLA, NFU, Friends of Earth etc).

Webcams of oral evidence (Oral evidence in writing)

APPG "UK role in Global Food Security": UK's role in tackling the challenge of Global Food Security up until 2050.

Session	Oral Evidence	Main points
May 7	DEFRA Team (Benn, May Watson)	"No ifs No buts, need to produce as much as possible". But dont say what, where or how much.
April 1	EU Agricultural Policy	Markets should be able to respond to increase production in foreseeable future
Mar 30	Soil Association	Little R&D funding for the 'agroecological approaches' and techniques for 'organic and low-input systems'
Mar 18	Natural England	We can provide enough for all provided we look after our environment.
Mar 4	NFU, CLA & Fisherfolk	NFU say "increase productivity", Country Landowners Association say we must include the environment. Fisherfolk say scientists must work with fishers..
Feb 25	Tesco and Unilever (with Food & Drink Federation)	Tesco have not thought about 'Food Security' in 20-30 years time. Unilever say "beware biofuels".
Feb 4	Chatham House Rothamsted/Warwick WRI	Chatham House: "why bother increasing UK production on a few fields in East England when we could lever our science worldwide?" (exact quote)
Jan 28	Tim Lang & John Beddington	TL to provide definition of "Food Security". JB regretted the demise of science base for Ag/Hort particularly citing Wye College closure.

\* Our EP@W Director, Dr Charlie Clutterbuck, was the Specialist Adviser to the EFRA Committee for this report and is visible, just once - at beginning of May 7 when DEFRA come in! (Top left second down....)

Response

The UK government responded to this EFRA report setting up a consultation on the matters raised.

For The Inspector Mrs. Chivers

Sir John Beddington

Government Chief Scientist

28 January 2009 Professor John Beddington

Card OK.

**Professor Beddington:** I would not disagree with that, and if we thought about the science budget as a whole, arguments could be made along those lines given the amount of money that has gone into the financial sector. Taking the food, I think 29 million is not—

**Q60 Lynne Jones:** The science budget has grown, but within that growth—

**Professor Beddington:** There has been a decline in the Defra budget for food. That is unfortunate and I think it should be reversed.

**Q61 Lynne Jones:** That leads me on to the issue of the skills base, which you again highlighted in your submission and also in other submissions. What are we going to do about this? It does seem to me to be serious when you are talking about areas like plant breeding, which is going to be crucial, if we are going to be able to feed the world. Are you making any recommendations as to what we are going to do to build up that skills base and what sort of timescale are we going to need for that?

**Professor Beddington:** In terms of the skills base, obviously there are some time delays, but I believe the focus on research, which the BBSRC are leading (and the BBSRC has indicated that it intends to spend significantly more on agricultural research than has hitherto been the case) will have a natural feedback, in the sense that with that extra research budget universities will look to their postgraduate population to do it, but I think there are some difficult issues there which need highlighting. I highlighted in my comment that we are losing some rather key skills. One of the biggest problems that we have at the moment in world food terms is the control of pests and disease. Many of the pests are insect pests, and yet our training and postgraduate training in the taxonomy of insects and arthropods in general is actually, I would not say dangerously low, but certainly a matter of concern. I think we need to look right across the board and say, "Where is the training going? Where are our colleges where people can actually do research that is sufficiently applied, that is going to be relevant to agriculture?" I think that this is the thing that I will be taking up with my colleagues in DIUS, because DIUS has the responsibility for the development of the skills-base at universities and, indeed, also by dealing with the funding of the research councils. So my colleague Adrian Smith, who is the Director General of the research councils, and I will be exploring ways to do it. What I would say at the moment is that there has been a run-down. I highlighted the decline in some of the major institutions. I am glad to say, some of the BBSRC institutions are still some of the best in the world, but are they getting the right recruits in? We have an enormous challenge, I believe, an intellectual advantage, for example, in plant genomics, which we should not see eroded, but getting people in to do degrees in agricultural science, I am not entirely certain that is the right way to do it because I think many of the problems that we have are generated in biology and chemistry, and some of them in physics and engineering, and what

we have got to try to do is ensure that there is a research base and an appropriate career structure for people to take this forward. One of the things that I was extremely saddened about when I was at Imperial College was that Imperial merged with Wye College—which seemed to me to be an enormous opportunity—the longest standing agricultural college in Britain, and, unfortunately, for whatever reasons, and I was not party to it, that merger did not really work and Wye College, effectively, in terms of its production of agricultural students and agricultural researchers ceased to exist. That is to be seriously regretted, but we have got to look at where we still have centres of excellence and where we can build on them, and I would cite BBSRC institutes and I would also indicate that some of the key departments, Reading being an obvious one, are areas where we have the chance to build on that. I think the funding level going into research is going to be increased, but we have also got to be thinking rather creatively about the job market, the way in which it works both in government and in the private sector.

**Q62 Lynne Jones:** I take your point about undergraduate training, but the old MAFF used to have a studentship scheme for postgraduate students. Is there a case for reinventing such a thing? We are not just talking about "blue skies" research, we obviously need to have the next stage of research, which is where we have probably lost out in the decline we have just been talking about. I am not sure you have answered my question about building up the skills base on the development side as opposed to the "blue skies" research area.

**Professor Beddington:** I think your point is a good one. The BBSRC is essentially funding work in the area of path breaking science. It is the remit of the research councils to do that. How do we actually build up the applied skills? I think there are different questions. The Food Research Partnership we are talking about I would seek to explore; I would also seek to explore it with DIUS, because we are in a situation where those individuals who are coming through have the applied skills, they know how to work with the farming industry, they know how to work with the retail industry. The recruitment of that is, I believe, uncertain and we need to be addressing it and I plan to do so. If you would like me back in a year's time, I would hope to come with some good news and some initiatives, but I do not have anything that I can show you at present.

**Q63 Lynne Jones:** You spoke earlier about what you are doing to engage stakeholders. Obviously some of those larger stakeholders, and some smaller organisations like breeders, are engaged in research, and it is very important that we have good co-operation at the research level. What are you doing to encourage that, or what do you envisage will need to be done if your aims are going to be achieved?

**Professor Beddington:** It is a good point. The analogy I made with the Energy Research Partnership is one where you have very large organisations. For example, the Energy Technology

Huxley School  
Extremely saddened by the loss of opportunity caused by closure of Ag. Sci. Dept or

Wye

Write  
Charles Godfrey

Royal Society (2009)

"Reaping the benefits: science and the sustainable intensification of global agriculture"

Published by The Royal Society, London