



Response from the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) to the:

Scottish Government

Rural Affairs and Environment Consultation on the Research Strategy for 2016-2021

1. AHDB is funded from levies which cover about 75% of total agricultural output in the United Kingdom (UK). We support commercial horticulture in Great Britain (HDC), milk production in Great Britain (DairyCo), potatoes in Great Britain (Potato Council) and cereals and oilseeds in the UK (HGCA), pig meat production in England (BPEX), beef and lamb production in England (EBLEX).
2. The AHDB response represents the views of the three crop divisions, all of which operate, and have levy payers in Scotland, but the comments are also relevant for all three livestock divisions, of which DairyCo also operates in Scotland, as a robust R&D strategy and effective Scottish research capability is important within the UK agriculture and horticulture context.
3. AHDB undertakes research and development (R&D) as well as farm-level knowledge transfer (KT) and knowledge exchange (KE) activity. We also provide essential market information to improve supply chain transparency, deliver marketing promotion activities to help stimulate demand and work to maintain and develop export markets.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Question 1: Do the 2011-2016 strategic priorities remain robust and relevant for the period 2016-2021?

The strategic priorities that are identified are robust and relevant to the interests of our industry's business sectors. The continuation of these priorities will benefit from integration with other UK R&D strategies to exploit synergies and enable effective delivery to end users.

Question 2: Do these 'enabling principles' set the right context or should additional principles be adopted?

The enabling principles are integral to agriculture and horticulture as they will help deliver the UK Agri-Tech Strategy and enable Scottish Research providers to exploit appropriate opportunities from the EU Horizon 2020 programme.

It would be appropriate to include somewhere in this section's introductory paragraph, "scientific excellence" as the three principles are all reliant on this.

Question 3: Are the high level outcomes sufficiently clear, if not, what changes would you propose?

In developing the three high level outcomes the 'business change drivers' need to link more explicitly with business efficiency and integration of the supply chains meeting consumer needs.

In considering agricultural productivity (section 7.2, first bullet) in the context of the outcomes expected for the high level outcomes , 'optimised' would be a better descriptor rather than maximised because this can recognise the necessary trade-off's for societal and environmental deliverables.

The ambition to improve long-term health prospects through healthy diets (third bullet) is applauded.

The adoption of a 'systems approach' (section 7.3) in the proposed research themes is crucial but this system approach must include the economic and social dimensions of the system too.

The consolidation from two programme and eight themes to the specific three high level outcomes is welcome as it provides a degree of clarity. However we have a concern that this does not fully reflect our industry needs with regard to Crop Yield and Quality. This needs to be specifically identified as it does feed through into business performance and healthy diets. Perhaps this could be added as a third bullet under Productive, profitable and sustainable agriculture built on:

- High crop yield and quality
- High health and welfare livestock and
- Appropriate land use

Alternatively it could be developed as a separate high level theme.

The outcomes should also specifically recognise the maintenance of the high plant health status of crops (especially seed potatoes) in Scotland and addressing national biosecurity concerns which may pose a threat to overall sustainability.

Question 4: Are the three broad themes identified an appropriate way of structuring our work? If not, what alternatives should be considered?

In the consultation document the balance between the themes is not explicitly stated and some indication of this would be helpful to gauge levels of commitment, resource allocation to be made and activity expected to be delivered.

The activity areas where there is expected overlap between the themes should be identified as, in the text, it appears that they are independent of each other, whereas the Venn diagram implies overlap. This can lead to confusion in the interpretation.

Question 5: How can the SG maximise the benefits of on-going investment in the MRPs to build and benefit from connectivity with the wider science base?

There is a real challenge in quantifying the benefits across the different themes for comparative purposes, but this is important to identify where the investments in MRP's can provide greatest return and encourage both government and industry investment.

From the AHDB perspective the delivery of practical outcomes is crucial and where the MRP's can access other funding e.g. from UK Research Councils, this provides additional benefit to the industry so SG should more actively engage in discussions to steer the priorities of the Councils and enable greater access to this UKRC funding.

Similarly, EU funding provides opportunities for the MRP's and SG should help facilitate the development of UK wide and international collaborations that could help improve access to this funding.

Question 6: What are your views of the performance and operation of the CoEs to date, are there any additional areas that would benefit from such support?

The Centres of Expertise have had a remit of 'facilitating connectivity between the research base and the needs of those developing and delivering policy. As such they have not had a particularly high profile with AHDB divisions and the industry's we represent. Although they may be performing against their policy remit, the areas of operation are very relevant to industry needs and their scope could be extended to include greater industry engagement

Question 7: Do you agree with the SG's proposal to end support for SPs and to explore alternative mechanisms to strengthen engagement between its investment in research and the business sectors it aims to support?

The Strategic Partnerships have been another layer within the delivery landscape and simplification of this will be useful. Industry engagement is usually via direct contacts with the MRP's and establishing mechanisms that exploit this directly will probably be more helpful to industry.

The concept of the Innovation Centres, that link MRP's with HEI's, providing this more transparent mechanism for industry engagement is welcomed and these could possibly provide the nexus for new areas of innovation.

Question 8: Do you have any proposals for how the research portfolio can better link to the business community to deliver the desired outcome?

It is necessary to maintain and further develop the level of industry engagement at all levels in the development and subsequent delivery of the R&D strategy. This will help to ensure that there is a full understanding of our industry needs and priorities as set out, for example, in AHDB business plans and R&D strategy documents. The engagement should include both cross-sectoral and whole supply chain approach.

Practically links could be improved by increasing the SG commitment to co-funding with industry and other funding bodies. This would engage industry and the outcomes from the research would be more commercially relevant.

Question 9: Is the purpose and value of underpinning capacity sufficiently clear, if not how can it be improved?

Yes, it is vital that this funding continues to provide the capability to deliver the appropriate research, develop new skills and lever additional support.

In this regard the training of new PhD scientists and technicians - with industry relevant skills, is crucial. The national requirement of the different industry skill needs should be considered alongside the 'attractiveness' of the science area which previously has played a large part in determining the training areas, which haven't necessarily met industry needs.

The on-going maintenance and characterisation of international germplasm collections (e.g. Commonwealth Potato Collection) is crucial if we are to exploit the findings from genetics and genomics.

Question 10: Do you have any views regarding the performance and use of the Contract Research Fund including how it could be improved?

It is important that this fund is available and responsive to immediate needs.

If further capacity is needed to fully address issues then flexibility is required under other initiatives to develop R&D within the main programmes.

Question 11: Could the overall delivery model be further simplified in a way which still enables SG to meet its strategic priorities for the portfolio, if so how?

Integrating the R&D and Knowledge Exchange activities more closely within programmes could provide efficiencies and improve practical interpretation and delivery to industry. This would require a greater emphasis on translational research.

Question 12: Do you have specific suggestions as to how the RESAS research strategy can contribute to the delivery of the objectives of the CAMERAS partnership?

The alignment and co-ordination of science is important; we feel that this can be improved for crops by including industry representatives.

As well as alignment and co-ordination of the science, the CAMERAS groups with greater industry representation, could also consider how that integrates with business performance and wealth creation.

Question 13: Do you have any suggestions for developing the partnership with other research funders?

The consultation document focuses on securing the science base in Scotland. However, the integration of the Scottish science base with other establishments across the UK and with international partners is crucial to exploit the opportunities and synergies that will deliver outcomes and benefits to Scotland and its customers, both in Scotland and elsewhere. In this context better engagement with UK Research Councils is important. From our perspective this has not been as effective as it could be and SG funding to allow greater MRP involvement in e.g. UK platforms and research initiatives will lead to more effective partnership working.

The AHDB funds R&D and KT for the benefit of its levy payers and would welcome further engagement with Scottish Government on the development of specific R&D programmes and delivery initiatives

Question 14: Do you have any particular suggestions as to how greater engagement with the HEI sector might be achieved?

The HEI's have specialist skills and resources not available to MRP's. The level of agriculture and horticulture industry engagement with HEI's has, generally, not been as high as with MRP's. However, the HEI's offer innovation potential to industry and mechanisms to enable better links and better understanding by industry of HEI capabilities links would be beneficial. Potentially interactions could e.g. exploit novel technologies and allow pooling of resources to address strategic issues from different research perspectives.

Question 15: Are the research outputs from the RESAS portfolio of research readily accessible or can this be further improved, if so how?

The scientific quality of the reports from the RESAS portfolio is good, both with the programme reports and the peer reviewed publications. However, timeliness of the delivery is a challenge in relation to commercial relevance and exploitation.

The delivery of the science papers is only one aspect and the KT interpretation is crucial and the use of e.g. farm platforms for translational activities is beneficial.

More use could be made of existing KT infrastructure, including land managers, advisors and the network of monitor farms.

Question 16: Is the current performance management approach fit for purpose or can it be improved, if so how?

The performance management system that is outlined is very much an internal mechanism. As outputs are a crucial measure of the performance of the programme, wider engagement with, and feedback by industry and end users should be considered.

Dr Mike Storey
Head of Potato Council R&D
On behalf of AHDB
25th April 2014