

Embargoed until 00.01am 6th February 2019

Faces of farming highlight the opportunity for agriculture post-Brexit

Project asked experts about their hopes and expectations for the future of farming in Britain

Embargoed until 00.01am 6th February 2019 – Scientists and experts have warned of the “barrier to innovation” facing British farming following the European Court of Justice’s ruling on gene editing, but also highlighted the opportunity Brexit represents for the UK to set its own course, during a series of interviews for a project seeking to bring to life the faces of farming in the UK.

A research scientist who has devoted his career to producing a land based, agricultural source of Omega 3 fish oils, and the head of the National Pig Association, are among those who have been interviewed for a new website developed by the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (ABC). The interviews cover subjects as wide-ranging as the impact of rising temperatures and the challenge of engaging an increasingly urban population in where their food comes from.

Through four in-depth interviews with those on the country’s agricultural frontline, the site explores some of the main challenges facing the sector and discusses ideas around how these may be met.

In a wide-ranging interview, Paul Temple, a mixed farmer and past Vice President for the NFU, expressed disappointment that “Europe has effectively closed its door” to innovation by virtue of its regulatory approach to gene editing and GM crops. He warned that we are facing unprecedented challenges thanks to rising temperatures, leaving us vulnerable to fluctuating food prices, but he suggested Brexit could be an opportunity for the UK to diverge from EU regulation on plant science.

“While we don’t have a big enough commercial market alone for these crops, the mere fact that the UK can now do the trials and encourage the technology, put it in the fields and demonstrate it can be workable and manageable to the rest of the EU, will be a real positive for the UK post-Brexit. It would potentially allow those that want to have the choice in Europe to say ‘look this is what the UK has done, this is how it is managed, it’s perfectly possible’”.

His concerns were echoed by other interviewees, including Dr Zoe Davies, Chief Executive of the Pig Association, who observed that regulatory decisions in Europe are currently “politically driven, not evidence-based at all”. But she is optimistic about what Brexit can potentially bring. “The fact that we have a forward-thinking government that is embracing technology and wanting the industry to move forward and improve productivity, as well as thinking about our ability to provide food for the British public, creates quite a conducive environment for us to suggest certain technologies are taken forward.”

Philip Wynn, Chair of LEAF, who has spent 45 years managing and advising businesses in nearly every sector of the agricultural industry, suggested it is essential that the agricultural policy of the future has a clear vision and is implemented with clarity and leadership. Given his experience, Wynn is clear that gene editing and new breeding techniques in UK food and farming will play a central role. “Key will be the ability to grow crops with fewer inputs,” he said. “Intelligent, sustainable farming systems are the future.”

Rothamsted Research Professor Jonathan Napier told the website that the UK has a wellspring of smart, well-trained research scientists who have been limited by Europe’s regulatory regime. “The UK has a fantastic research base for plant related technology, but as part of the EU there has been no obvious route to market for that - it has been effectively untranslatable,” he commented. “Ultimately,

you are doing fundamental research funded by the UK taxpayer, but looking to exploit it outside the UK.”

Their comments echo the findings of a report authored by independent expert Graham Brookes last year, which found that the EU crop biotechnology regulatory system has already contributed to a significant loss of high value-added research scientist jobs and has left the UK subject to a crop trait research and development ‘gap’. The paper concluded that the potential long-term benefits to the UK economy are likely to be highest if the UK sets its own path on EU crop biotechnology based on sound science, consistent with the regulatory systems operating in most other countries of the world.

Mark Buckingham, Chair of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council said: *“We are delighted to launch this collection of interviews with some of the leading lights in British farming. As they set out, there are many challenges facing the agriculture and food production sector, and technology and innovation will be key to addressing them. It’s clear that Brexit represents a moment of opportunity, and that there could be tremendous potential benefits to the UK setting its own path on techniques such as editing individual genes in crops. A reset of agricultural policy to ensure that regulation rests on science is critical if we are to meet the challenges of the future.”*

ENDS

Notes to editors

The case studies website can be accessed at <http://bit.ly/csatsusd19>.

For more information please contact Jennifer Lipman on Jennifer.lipman@lexcomm.co.uk or +44 (0)20 7025 2325

Agricultural Biotechnology Council (abc):

- abc is the umbrella organisation for the agricultural biotechnology industry in the UK.
- abc works with the food chain and research community to invest in a broad range of crop technologies – including conventional and advanced breeding techniques, such as GM.
- These are designed to promote the sustainable intensification of agriculture by tackling challenges such as pests, diseases and changing climatic conditions, whilst reducing water usage, greenhouse gas emissions and other inputs.

The member companies are BASF, Bayer, Corteva and Syngenta.