

**A report of a facilitated workshop with members of the
Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology
Commission conducted by Corr Willbourn Research and
Development on 21st March 2005.**

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC) was set up in June 2000 following a review in 1999 by the Cabinet Office and the Office of Science and Technology of the Advisory and Regulatory framework for Biotechnology. Its remit was to provide the UK Government and Devolved Administrations with independent, strategic advice on developments in biotechnology and their implications for agriculture and the environment.

On 27 May 2004 the Office of Science and Technology announced an organisational and performance review of the AEBC. An Independent Reviewer, Dr Neil Williams, was appointed to conduct the review which was published on 2 December 2004. The report recommended that the Commission should complete its current work programme by the end of the financial year 2004-05 but should not continue beyond this. Government responded officially to the report on 5 April 2005, confirming that the AEBC would be wound up at the end of April 2005.

No AEBC member disagreed with the main recommendation of the review report, that the Commission should be wound up after completing its current work programme. However, there was an 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. During the AEBC meeting held on 9th December 2004, it was agreed that a professional research company should be invited to conduct a workshop with members of the AEBC and facilitate discussion on points arising from the review and the experiences of the AEBC as a whole.

This document is the report of that workshop, which was conducted on 21st March 2005.

1.2 Workshop Objectives

The workshop addressed and discussed the following issues:

1. Members' experience of the AEBC, its successes and failures and the lessons learned since its inception in June 2000.
2. Members' views on the issues raised by, and options for, engagement with the public on the introduction of new technologies (as recommended in the review).
3. The concerns raised by Members arising from the review and listed in their open letter to Ministers.
4. Members views on the legacy of the AEBC and how that should be carried forward to any future body or bodies that take on some or all of its role.

Re objective 3 above, the workshop did not reiterate the views on the review that were expressed by members in their open letter to ministers (see link at <http://www.aebc.gov.uk/aebc/index.shtml>). However the workshop did address the concerns noted in that letter to be of primary importance, viz. *the need to consider biotechnology strategically, the need for agriculture as a whole to be considered more strategically, the need for Government to learn lessons and the need for any strategic body to report to all relevant parts of Government.*

1.3 Workshop Method

The workshop lasted four hours.

It was moderated by Hugh Willbourn and David Corr.

Members were asked to generate short notes of their opinions and experiences under various headings and these were then discussed and developed by means of sub-group discussions, peer-scoring, spatial mapping and plenary discussions.

1.4 Workshop Attendees

This document is a summary report of the views of those members of the AEBC who were at the discussion. Some members, and some long-standing former members, did not contribute. Those present were:

Professor Malcolm Grant (Chair)

Julie Hill (Deputy Chair)

Anna Bradley

Helen Browning

Dr David Buckeridge

Dr Dave Carmichael

Dr Matthew Freeman

Professor Robin Grove-White

Judith Hann

Dr Rosie Hails

Professor Keekok Lee

Dr Derek Langslow

Dr Sue Mayer

Justine Thornton

Dr Paul van Heyningen (secretariat)

Tonima Saha (secretariat).

2 Abstract

The Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC) was unusual in membership, format and remit. Its members took part as individuals rather than as representatives of organisations and their views encompassed a broad and, at the extremes, adversarial range of opinions.

Its remit allowed the general public to frame the terms of one of its major enquiries, and it sponsored a number of innovative public engagement exercises. It successfully delivered high quality, unanimous reports of substance on controversial topics.

Three points stood out in the discussion of the Commission's achievement and legacy.

Firstly, the experience of its members highlighted the value, to the members and their discussions and decision-making, of the relatively long-lived nature of the Commission which allowed members with widely differing views to learn to work together to tackle highly contentious issues.

Secondly, the topics of agriculture, environment and biotechnology contain issues of long-term concern and significance to the general public. Members felt that well-funded, well-informed independent strategic advice on developments in biotechnology and on the development of sustainable agriculture is of vital importance and that the Government should ensure its availability.

Thirdly, during its work the Commission developed considerable expertise in public engagement on complex scientific and ethical matters. Members felt strongly that the expertise they have developed should be preserved and made available in the future for further consultations about scientific and commercial developments which may have a bearing on the populace or environment as a whole.

3 Content and Analysis

This report is not an exhaustive verbatim record, nor a re-iteration of points, opinions and topics recorded elsewhere. It is rather a summary of the challenges, reflections, and achievements which those AEBC members present discussed and their beliefs and wishes about the learnings and legacy of the Commission.

Many topics recurred in different sections of the workshop, and in this analysis comments are condensed under key headings below.

3.1 Challenges and Reflections

3.1.1 Trust

The membership of the Commission was drawn from a very broad range of organisations. In the early days there was considerable distrust between members with differing attitudes towards biotechnology. This in turn meant that there was distrust between some sub-groups and some members of the Commission as a whole. It is recognised that, given the political turmoil and sensitivities at the time of the inception of the commission, it is unlikely that such distrust could have been avoided.

However, due to the commitment of members to the success of the Commission, working relationships of trust were forged and in later years greater trust was created between Commission members. It must be noted however that trust between members of the commission did not necessarily extend to trust between the different interests or organisations with which members might be associated.

3.1.2 Resources

It was universally acknowledged that the Commission was significantly under-resourced, especially in its early years. It was felt that the magnitude and the difficulty of the task which the Commission was set was considerably underestimated.

(a) Administrative Support

It was felt that the secretariat was initially too small to service the requirements of the Commission and its workload.

(b) Funding

The activities of the Commission were limited by its funding. In particular the public consultation exercise concerning the commercialization of GM crops was limited in scope and size by the funds available. Many members felt that the exercise, and in particular outreach to broader sections of the non-aligned public, would have been enhanced with better funding.

(c) Time

Several members felt that the Commission was initiated too late in relationship to the scientific and technological advances which it was considering. There was also some concern that its activities were driven by excessive haste. Hence in two ways there was a shortage of time. Firstly, workstreams had tight deadlines and secondly when data was presented to the Commission there was, for some, insufficient time to consider it deeply enough.

3.1.3 Remit

It was widely understood that the remit of the Commission was a function of the political circumstances of its inception and that GM crops were rightly its initial focus. However latterly, and in particular as public disquiet about GM crops became evident, alternative biotechnological possibilities and agricultural activities, along with a growing emphasis on sustainability, became more salient and significant. In this latter phase it was felt that the biotechnology remit had precluded deeper investigation of wider options for sustainable agriculture.

3.1.4 Workload

It was noted that the workload of Commission members was considerable and at times extremely demanding. The commitment and dedication of members in dealing with it was acknowledged.

3.1.5 Topic

It was felt that at times the constraints of the Commission's remit artificially limited debate. On the one hand the focus on agriculture and environment curtailed discussion of GM applications outside agriculture, on the other hand the focus on GM precluded deeper consideration of other biotechnology applications. Some respondents felt that some issues were never fully settled, for example the question of whether there was a potential scientific response to fears of risk such that there could be GM applications which would not be considered 'inherently risky'.

3.1.6 Public Profile

It was felt that the Commission did not achieve a high public profile. Several members felt this was a failing. Some also felt that the 'GM Nation?' debate should not have been separately branded. This was understood to be largely a result of the temporal and financial constraints, however there was also, for some, a lack of a coherent vision of what the profile should be and how it should be achieved.

3.1.7 Credibility

Many members felt that the Commission and its findings did not attain the credibility they merited. There was a sense that this phenomenon was exacerbated by different parties modulating the credibility they ascribed to the Commission by reference to their perceptions of others' beliefs.

(a) With Government

It was felt that the Commission failed to secure complete credibility of the public debate on the commercialization of GM crops in the eyes of Ministers. While Commission members felt that debate, and its findings were robust, neither findings nor methodology were immune from Governmental critique.

(b) With Scientific community

There was some regret that, for some, the Commission did not achieve the standing it merited in the eyes of the scientific community.

(c) With General public

It was felt that members of the General Public who had contact with the Commission or its activities had, overall, considerable respect for the AEBC. However, due to the low profile of the Commission to the populace as a whole, and the fact that the diversity of members' points of view made quick, media-friendly reaction to events difficult, it did not achieve the authoritative position it could have attained in public and media discussion of GM and the commercialization of GM crops.

(d) With industry

There was some regret that the Commission did not appear to achieve the standing it merited within industry.

3.1.8 World views

Members discovered through their participation in the Commission that their points of difference were not simply disagreements about facts, nor even values, but beyond and beneath such disagreements, which were both many and real, there were significant differences in both language use and world view. These deep rooted differences explain to some extent the difficulties the Commission faced in explaining and achieving credibility of its activities in external communities each with their own discourse.

3.1.9 Relationship to Government

There was a sense that lines of communication with Government were less clear and direct than desirable. The AEBC secretariat was provided by DTI but, by virtue of its remit, much of the Commission's business was with Defra. It was felt that communications with Defra were not optimal, nor were the difficulties ever adequately resolved.

Further, regardless of Department, there was some sense that Government was not as responsive to, nor supportive of, the Commission as it might have been.

3.2 Achievements

3.2.1 Working relationships

It was considered a notable and worthwhile achievement by all parties that members from disparate backgrounds and affiliations developed working relationships over the lifetime of the Commission that made possible cooperation and worthwhile output.

3.2.2 Chairmanship

The expertise of the chairman was singled out for particular recognition and praise.

3.2.3 Mutual enlightenment of members

Members from diverse backgrounds observed that they had benefited from working on a long-term basis with other members of very different persuasions. Some had, as a result, modified their opinions and all had learned a great deal about the beliefs and attitudes of other parties. It was felt that the learning achieved by working together was richer than could have been achieved by other means, and greater than could ever have been learned at a distance by perusal of statements in the media or written publications.

3.2.4 Recognition of views of diverse provenance and expression

Further to learning about each other's views, some members felt that they had specifically learned more about points of view that were based in world views very different from their own. In particular it was recognised that the 'deficit model' of the public understanding of science, although congruent with scientific mindsets and models, does not adequately predict the response of a broad range of the general public.

3.2.5 Consensus

In spite of the deep and considerable differences of opinion the Commission produced high quality, unanimous reports which are both substantial and

meaningful. No dissenting minority reports were produced. This was recognised to be a significant achievement, brought about by hard work and diligent commitment by members.

3.2.6 Innovative public engagement

The Commission was felt to have initiated and developed a wide range of innovative methods of public engagement. It was felt that an expertise in understanding and commissioning public engagement exercises has been built up amongst members of the Commission. The initial policy decision to allow the public to frame the issues for the GM debate, and to commission work which made that possible was considered to be very helpful and productive. The commissioning of the 'Narrow but Deep' strand of the GM Nation debate was also singled out by some as a very useful contribution to the overall outcome of the debate.

3.2.7 Clear description of public sensibilities

It was felt that the public engagement exercises validated the views of the public which were expressed in non-scientific language. They also demonstrated that 'deficit model' was inadequate to explain or predict public views.

3.2.8 Independence from Government

The Commission was felt to have successfully maintained its independence from Government, both in fact and in the eyes of observers.

3.2.9 Effect on policy

Although some reservations and regrets were expressed it was felt that the Commission did have a significant and appropriate effect on Government policy.

3.3 Learnings and Legacy of the AEBC

3.3.1 Agriculture, environment and biotechnology

It was felt that the Commission had made available to Government, and accessible to any member of the public, significant findings in each of the fields in which it has published reports.

3.3.2 Need for strategic advice and thinking

The Commission has identified many areas of scientific advance and potential commercialization of biotechnology which pose significant social, environmental and ethical questions. It is unanimously felt that the Government should ensure that it has timely, well-grounded advice concerning such future developments. Some therefore felt that one or more bodies should be established with adequate funding and a broad membership to advise Government.

3.3.3 Sustainable agriculture policy advice

During the lifetime of the Commission the issue of sustainable agriculture has risen in significance. It was felt that well-informed advice on sustainable agriculture will be of increasing importance and a body should be established to advise Government about it. The discussion did not make clear whether there should be one body or two considering the topics of biotechnology and sustainable agriculture, but it was clear that however it was enacted the consideration should be cognisant of developments in both fields and function cooperatively.

3.3.4 Public engagement expertise

The Commission has gained valuable and unique expertise in public consultation and members believe their work has been an important and significant contribution to the furtherance of democracy. It would therefore wish to preserve this learning and ensure it is available for other areas in which it will be valuable and appropriate.

3.3.5 Innovative composition and structure

The composition of the Commission was unusual. Members were recruited in their capacities as individuals rather than as representatives and the range of membership covered a very wide range of opinions. It maintained a strong independence of Governmental, commercial, academic and institutional agendas. This independence was considered to be valuable both in terms of credibility and in terms of ensuring the discussions and output of the Commission were not suborned by external interests.