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UK urged to 'bring back' sound science as the basis for regulating crop genetic innovations post-Brexit

Maintaining strict alignment with current 'mal-administered' EU rules risks more trading difficulties and further loss of economic and wider societal benefits, report warns

10th October 2018 – Failure to diverge from some aspects of EU regulation of crop biotechnology and new breeding techniques (NBTs) after Brexit will represent a missed opportunity for the UK and could lead to the UK failing to take advantage of available economic and wider societal benefits, a new independent analysis has found.

'UK plant genetics: a regulatory environment to maximise advantage to the UK economy post Brexit' considers three future scenarios for the regulation of gene edited crops and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), ranging from maintaining current alignment with the EU through improved implementation of EU rules, to the UK setting its own regulatory path on both GMOs and NBTs. Written by independent agricultural economist, Graham Brookes of PG Economics Ltd, the report concludes that if the UK sets its own sound-science-based regulatory system, it will provide a first-class food safety assessment system that potentially gives farmers better seed, improves their competitiveness, better meets consumer demands and maximises long-term economic and wider societal benefits to the UK.

Currently, all crop biotechnology innovations are subject to the EU's regulatory framework. Yet as the report notes, this approvals system has consistently failed to operate as the legislation intended, with authorisations taking years longer than intended and scientific opinion from the body specifically established to provide advice to policy makers frequently ignored. This has contributed to business uncertainty, disrupting trade and driving away research and development investment from the plant breeding sector. In July, the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) ruled that NBTs will be subject to the same regulations, effectively signalling that the EU is an unfavourable location to undertake plant genetics research, development and commercialisation of new crop innovations.

The report, commissioned by the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (ABC), highlights 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'. Private sector research and development expenditure in the sector has fallen dramatically in the last 20 years, from about £50 million per year in the late 1990s to about £1.25 million today.

With the UK set to leave the EU in 2019, the report finds that if the UK remains completely aligned with EU regulation, this will likely cause further trading difficulties, greater business uncertainty, the loss of more productivity-enhancing innovations for farmers and further losses of competitiveness for UK agriculture. In particular, the recent CJEU's ruling that effectively subjects most NBTs to the EU's GMO regulatory system, puts the EU at odds with the leading agricultural producing and exporting nations of the world that have, based on sound science, determined that many of these innovations do not need to be regulated 'as GMOs'. This has the potential to cause significant trade disruption, especially for key livestock feed ingredients and lead to short-term raw material shortages, higher production costs, resulting in longer-term losses of competitiveness and jobs in the EU.



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In contrast, the PG Economics paper highlights that limited divergence from current EU rules that commits to making the existing EU regulations operate 'as intended' plus divergence from the CJEU decision relating to the regulation of some NBTs has the potential to deliver economic gains from a combination of improvement in the competitiveness of the agricultural commodity user sectors and from new investment in NBT research and new crop seed development.

The paper also concludes that the potential long-term benefits to the UK economy are likely to be highest if the UK sets its own path on regulating both GMOs and NBTs based on sound science, consistent with the regulatory systems operating in most other countries of the world. This is likely to result in the highest levels of UK-based plant genetics sector research expenditure and employment and may also lead to the commercial development of more new crop traits based on NBTs or GMOs becoming available to UK farmers and food processors.

Graham Brookes, agricultural economist and author of the paper said *'Brexit provides the UK with the opportunity to re-instate sound science at the heart of regulation of important crop improvement techniques based on plant genetics. 'A sound-science-based regulatory system that moves away from the current mal-administered and inconsistent EU regulatory system would provide a first-class safety assessment system consistent with regulatory systems in the majority of countries around the world and provide scope for delivering both important economic benefits to the UK economy and wider societal benefits through better quality products and/or an enhanced environment. Continuing to adhere strictly to the current EU system is not the way forward if the UK wishes to develop long term sustainable agricultural production systems'*

Mark Buckingham, Chair of the Agricultural Biotechnology Council said: *'A generation of British farmers have operated without technology that is taken for granted around the world while the EU has become known for its political regulatory decisions. Brexit offers the chance to help Britain lead the world in agri-science and ensure the UK enjoys the economic benefits of the sector. To incur the costs of leaving the EU without grasping the opportunities would be a historic mistake. The potential benefits of the UK setting its own path on techniques such as editing individual genes in crops are significant, they include boosting productivity and reducing costs for farmers and consumers. Using new techniques will help to address the serious challenges of keeping our farmers competitive, maintaining a safe, affordable food supply, while better protecting consumers and our natural environment. I urge the Government to build on the science-based approach established while a member of the EU and use the reset of agricultural policy as an opportunity to develop a UK approach to better regulation.'*

Notes to editors

Full copies of the report are available on request. For more information please contact Jennifer Lipman Jennifer.lipman@lexcomm.co.uk or +44 (0)207 025 2325 or Graham Brookes grahambrookesgbc@btconnect.com or +44 (0)1432 851007

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.