

FSAW 22-10-01 - - Minutes of the Welsh Food Advisory Meeting held on 14 July 2022

Meeting held remotely via Microsoft Teams

Present:

Welsh Food Advisory Committee (WFAC) Members Attending:

Peter Price, Chair; Alan Gardner; Dr Philip Hollington; Christopher Brereton OBE; Georgia Taylor; Dr John Williams; Jessica Williams

Officials Attending:

Julie Pierce – Director Wales, Information and Science
Nathan Barnhouse – Director for Wales
Sioned Fidler – Head of Communications, Welsh Language and Business Support
Lucy Edwards – Business Manager
Jonathan Davies – Head of Policy (Standards) and Consumer Protection

Observers:

Kerys James-Palmer- Head of Regulatory Policy
Representatives from Shared Regulatory Services (Vale of Glamorgan)
Torfaen County Borough Council
Representatives from CIEH

Presenters:

Rebecca Lamb
Chris Stockdale
Bill MacDonald
Laura Broomfield
Professor Huw Jones

1. Introductions and apologies

1.1 The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting, apologies were noted from Helen Taylor.

2. Declaration of interests

2.1 No new declarations were made.

3. Genetic Technology – Precision Breeding

3.1 Professor Robin May, Chief Scientific Adviser, FSA - A recorded presentation was delivered by Professor Robin May to set the scientific context for Precision Breeding and outlining the difference between Genetic Modification and Genetic Editing. Given our role to protect safety and consumer confidence in food. Robin then explained the FSA's authorisation process for precision breeding will be underpinned by 5 key principles; Safety, Transparency, Proportionality, Traceability and Building Consumer Confidence.

3.2 Peter Quigley, Rebecca Lamb, Chris Stockdale, FSA Policy – Rebecca explained that the aim of the Bill is to take precision breeding out of the scope of GMO regulations. Defra led England only Bill. Rebecca described the parliamentary process and expected timescales for royal ascension of the Bill. Chris explained that the Bill will grant the FSA the power to build a new framework for regulation of precision bred organisms for food and feed use. This will sit alongside other frameworks for the authorisation of regulated products. In addition to the framework, there will be a new public register established and maintained by the FSA to inform consumers and build FSA commitments around transparency. Work is currently being set in motion in anticipation of the Bill being given Royal Ascent, working with colleagues across the agency. A four-nation approach is being applied whilst developing the new framework along with consumer and stakeholder engagement.

3.3 Bill MacDonald, Welsh Government - Bill explained that GE was not a priority for Welsh Government Ministers prior to the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill. He advised that Welsh Government Ministers haven't yet taken a decision on this, but the Minister's position remains precautionary, and that Welsh Government are currently researching and gathering evidence to formulate a response. Bill advised that Ministers were disappointed with the low level of engagement and detailed discussion at the earliest possible stages with UK Government, but Welsh Government are liaising with colleagues in Defra for further advice and implications for the three frameworks that the Bill impacts. There are also considerations on how the UK Internal Market Act applies here and the conflict in differing legislations. There are concerns that the Bill will impact on the Organic sector as they must verify that supply chains are free of GMO's and the lack of provision for labelling, traceability and identification of these precision bred products would pose a threat to this industry and also consumer confidence. Trade could also be affected in the same way and lack of labelling, traceability and identification could lead to potential loss of access to EU markets. Welsh Government are working through and trying to understand any technical issues and are seeking to understand the potential impact of what is written in the Bill before making a decision. From a food and feed perspective, WG colleagues are working closely to provide advice to Ministers and have advised that ensuring that food and feed ingredients are safe is vital. That transparency and knowing the processes behind the gene editing process is important especially given that there is an ongoing desire for gene markers and tracking. The importance of ensuring consumer confidence and awareness is also a priority.

3.4 Dr Huw Jones, Aberystwyth University – Dr Jones, explained that his department at the University has evolved from the Welsh Plant Breeding Station to the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences. Research focusses on plant species and varieties that are important to Welsh agriculture for example, clover, oats and rye grass. The department also has one of the largest collections of seeds in the world for these species which is an extremely important resource. Gene editing is key tool in the research of the department to convert raw sequencing of DNA into an understanding of gene function to gain an insight into how the plants interact with each other and the environment. The research is to translate the sequence of DNA into function and use those genes in innovative and applied ways. Dr Jones explained that the department uses the European Nucleotide Archive which has 2.6 billion sequences of genes or genomes, with over 100,000 annotated sequences added every hour. This is a huge resource for Welsh scientists. Dr Jones advised that the department are working on genes that regulate tolerance to environmental stresses, nutritional quality, pest and disease resistance, seed shatter, nitrogen use efficiency and self-incompatibility. Dr Jones stressed the importance of being able to go from concept to lab to field as it's only in the field where these plants will interact with the

climate and the environment. Dr Jones gave an overview of research on increasing the lipid content of plants but under the current legislation they would not be able to take this research to the field. There are concerns that Welsh research will get left behind.

3.5 Laura Broomfield, FSA Social Science – Laura informed that she would be presenting on findings from 2021 research regarding consumer perceptions of genome editing, and genome edited food potentially being available in the UK. The team used a mixed methodology study. A qualitative stage using online deliberative dialogue workshops, bridged by an online community which ran during January and February with 80 participants from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI). A quantitative stage which involved an online survey of over 2000 consumers across England, Wales and NI. Laura explained that the key findings from the research were: awareness of gene edited foods was low, there was confusion between the terms gene editing and genetically modified, some participants thought that GM foods were already available. In terms of consumer concern and acceptability, there were concerns around products being unnatural, not knowing the long-term impacts on human health, animal welfare and farming concerns. Laura advised that participants were more receptive to gene editing when the topic was focussed on plants more than animals. In regard to regulation and labelling, consumers thought that GM and GE could be regulated separately but no less vigorously than GM, all GE products should be labelled clearly and communicated to the public when first entering the UK market. Participants became more accepting and willing to eat GE foods after the workshops. Laura advised that the sample in Wales is small, but analysis has been undertaken and there is no significant difference of views in England and Wales. Laura informed that the survey will be re-run in England and Wales with a more representative sample and changes to the context now that the Bill is going through Parliament. The team are also planning iterative consumer forums to get further qualitative insights on the more complex issues of how the FSA will regulate Precision Breeding (PB) and how consumers want to be informed about PB.

4. WFAC discussion

4.1 The WFAC discussed the presentations and then reviewed the 5 key principles of how the FSA will approach PB and made the following points:

- That it is important that relationships between Defra, FSA and WG are maintained to allow for open discussion and sharing of information.
- That it notes the research being done in Aberystwyth and across Wales.
- That it is pleased that there will be a more representative sample from Wales in the next consumer insight survey.
- That there currently seems to be a lack of knowledge and some misconception amongst consumers so any consumer messaging would need to be very clear to enable consumers to make an informed choice.
- That this is a very complex and fast developing area of work.

4.2 Overall, the committee are not opposed to Precision Breeding but have some concerns about how the legislation will be applied.

5. Chair's report (Paper 22/07/02)

5.1 The Chair gave an oral update on his report and informed that he had visited Newcastle University as part of the Board activities and expanded upon the Board Chair's visit to Cardiff for the Senedd event to launch the FSA/FSS Annual Review of Food Standards.

6. Director's report (Paper 22/07/03)

6.1 The Director gave an oral update on his report and informed that engagement now includes FSA in Wales Senior level engagement and highlighted the presentation at the CTSI Annual conference to the Greater Gwent Food Group for their work on the multilingual allergen resources.

7. Any other business

7.1 Members noted that the next business meeting would be on the 8 September and the next themed meeting will be held on 20 October in North Wales.

7.2 Comments from observers were that they appreciate the meetings now being held in open session again. A question was asked regarding business meetings being open to enable stakeholder contribution and feedback. The Chair advised that he would discuss with colleagues and provide a response.

7.3 A further comment was made that it would be beneficial for information to be placed on the webpage in advance of the meeting to allow for wider contribution from stakeholders who may have an interest.

Action: Secretariat to develop a communication plan for WFAC.

7.4 The Chair closed the meeting.