

Dyddiad: 9 Chwefror 2000

Amser: 9:00am - 12:30pm

Lleoliad: Ystafell Bwyllgora, Adeilad y Cynulliad Cenedlaethol

Cyhoeddir yr atodiad hwn yn yr iaith y'i derbyniwyd gan Gynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru.

**Welsh Assembly Briefing on Genetically Modified Organisms: Position Statement
Prof Chris Pollock: Member of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment.**

The Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) is a statutory scientific and technical committee, which advises the Government on the potential risks to human health and the environment from the release of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). ACRE also advises on the release of non-native animals and plants to the countryside of Great Britain. ACRE's terms of reference are:

1. To advise the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food acting jointly, the Scottish Ministers and the Assembly Secretaries on behalf of the National Assembly for Wales (hereafter 'the Ministers') and other bodies as appropriate on the exercise of powers under Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.
2. To advise the Ministers and other bodies as appropriate on releases into the environment of Great Britain of animals and plants covered by sections 14 and 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
3. To advise the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland) on releases of genetically modified organisms into the Northern Ireland environment for the purposes of The Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993.
4. To provide advice on request to the Ministers and other bodies as appropriate, including in particular to the Health and Safety Commission and Executive in respect of the human health aspects of releases to the environment.
5. To advise the Ministers and other bodies as appropriate on research needs.

ACRE has a varied workload but the bulk of the papers discussed at meetings will consist of

applications to release or market GMOs on which expert advice is required. ACRE's secretariat contains trained scientists who review each application to ensure that all the questions have been answered properly and all relevant information is present. When the secretariat is satisfied with the quality of the application dossier, it is presented to ACRE for consideration. During the review process, more information may be required from the applicants or additional safeguards may be imposed. The whole process is one of working with the applicant to ensure that all relevant information has been examined. Once this review process is completed and ACRE is satisfied that the release can be conducted safely only then will it advise the Secretary of State that consent can be given.

There is a commitment by ACRE to function in an open and transparent way. All members' interests are declared and published in ACRE's Annual Reports, the minutes of every meeting are available for inspection on the DETR website. This includes a description of the nature and location of every experimental release (Part B releases, Directive 90/220/EEC) for which consent has been granted. ACRE also has open and transparent working practices for dealing with any potential conflicts of interest. If a member has an interest in an agenda item then this is declared at the meeting and recorded in the Minutes. The member then leaves the room and/or takes no further part in the discussion.

It should be emphasised that ACRE is a scientific and technical committee charged with the case by case scientific safety assessment of releasing GMOs. The only issue at stake is whether or not a particular release will be safe. Other factors such as the commercial or strategic value of the GMO in question or consumer interests have no place here. The forum for these wider issues will be the new Agricultural and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC). It is hoped the new AEBC will provide a means of increasing the involvement and consultation of many stakeholder interests. These would include representatives of consumer groups, the biotechnology industry, farmer groups, environmental pressure groups, relevant government departments and those involved in the different regulatory bodies.

ACRE consists of 13 independent experts, including the chairman. All members are appointed by The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food acting jointly, the Scottish Ministers and the Assembly Secretaries on behalf of the National Assembly for Wales. Members are appointed on the basis of their technical and scientific expertise. They do not represent any particular stakeholder interests such as the biotechnology industry or environmental pressure groups. The range of expertise of ACRE members covers molecular biology, microbiology, plant virology, plant breeding, entomology, farmland and weed ecology, plant biology, biodiversity, conservation, farming practice and sustainable development.

It should be remembered that all ACRE members have many other responsibilities associated with being full time scientists and their work on ACRE represents only a small proportion of their professional lives. In this respect, most of the committee members are academics employed in universities and research institutes, some of which are involved in various applications and development of GM technology or receive biotechnology industry grants. This is because successive governments have encouraged all academic scientists, where possible, to build up contacts with industry, conduct strategically relevant research and obtain industrial sponsorship for their work. Therefore, it is impossible to draw together a group of academic scientists who are actively engaged in research

employing GM technology and who are competent to advise on complex GM issues yet do not have any contact with the biotechnology industry.

The experience of the ACRE member attending this briefing is a typical illustration of the realities of conducting public domain research in the UK. He is a plant physiologist and director of The Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research based at Aberystwyth. He conducts fundamental research on primary metabolism in plants, concentrating on the regulation of carbohydrate accumulation in leaves of temperate grasses and cereals and on the link between sugar accumulation and changes in the patterns of gene expression. This work links directly to commercially funded plant-breeding programmes that aim to improve the nutritive value of forage varieties. All of his work is, or will be, in the public domain as peer-reviewed publications in scientific journals. His work is supported primarily by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and by MAFF. As explained above, ACRE has appropriate working practices to deal with the infrequent conflicts of interest that this raises.