

## WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM ANDREW McLAY OF INNOVATE UK THIS WEEK?



### - THAT INNOVATION IS “KING”.... By John Giles, MIAgrM

Earlier on this week, I heard Andrew McLay, from Innovate UK, speak at an evening meeting of the Thames Valley branch of the Institute of Agricultural Management about the work of Innovate and the role of innovation in the development of the UK ag and food supply chain over the next few years.

As always with Andrew, you were left with the sense of a person totally on top of his subject and a thoughtful approach, with well developed views of what needs to be done and how this can be achieved.

Among the points he made in a fascinating presentation, were as follows:

- In recent past times, subject areas such as “marketing”, the dot.com era, the role of the BRIC countries and globalisation have dominated the conversation in the agri food sector - but now “innovation” is the real buzz word
- The opportunity for innovation in agriculture is seen as huge, not least due to the relatively low levels technology historically used in the sector compared to other industries. There is a real sense that individual entrepreneurs and SMEs can innovate just as quickly, if not more so, than larger agri business companies
- The UK has a long history of innovation, not just in the agri food sector, as well as funding and supporting this from government agencies. Since 2007, Innovate UK has supported some 11,000 projects to the tune of over £ 2 billion and with an economic return of 1: 7 on average
- Innovate rank projects based on “technology readiness” on a scale of 1 – 9 and are most active when projects reach stages 2/3 and then 6/7. Agricultural and food projects are, in effect, competing for funding with many other sectors, such as robotics, medical science, the automotive industry, construction etc
- The overall objective of the Government is to increase the competitiveness of the UK economy and improve its knowledge base
- In agriculture and farming, the major challenge is how we feed a world of 9 billion and the role the UK has in this, as well as transforming mid range performing farms in to the top 10%. This can be achieved by a combination of what is referred to as “co operative R & D” (between universities and commerce), international collaboration - with China and Canada in particular - better/improved on farm demonstration of new technologies and finally, developing what are called “communities of practise”
- The agri tech sector in the UK has been well supported with major initiatives announced by the Government in both 2009 and 2013 and the creation of 4 national agri tech centres. As such, there has been a massive injection of funding into the science base of the country
- Applications for funding have been received from organisations outside the UK - from the likes of India and Oceania – suggesting the rest of the world see the UK agri tech sector as a good space to invest in
- Challenges always remain though - these often relate to identifying the “winners”, providing continuity of funding and assessing the real R & D priorities for UK ag and food, where sometimes there is a less than coherent view
- There is huge enthusiasm for investment in “sustainable agriculture”, systems such as vertical farming and plant based proteins etc

Andrew concluded by saying there were opportunities with Innovate across the board – for academics, researchers, farmers and food companies and gave some great examples of the sorts of projects that Innovate has funded to date. This was a good evening all round and a clear indication of where the UK ag and food sector might well be heading in the future post Brexit. And don't forget – Innovation is now “King” !

John Giles

