

RESPONDING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF BIOTECHNOLOGY

Section 19.1 of 2010 Report refers

COMMENT

Developments in biotechnology provide enormous opportunities and challenges for the Irish agri-food sector. As the sector faces challenges associated with competitiveness and globalisation, it is essential that advances in biotechnology are harnessed across the whole food chain to meet consumer demands for high quality, safe, healthy foods that are produced in a sustainable environment. It is imperative that there is a credible and effective system to regulate the development and application of the technology.

The Government agree with the recommendations of the Committee that significant public resources should be provided for research in this area; that a positive but precautionary national policy on the release of GMOs to the environment should be pursued; that systems should be developed to ensure that GMOs do not compromise the integrity of non-GMO production systems; and that there should be clear labelling of foods which contain GMOs.

ACTIONS

To support the recommendations of the Committee the following actions will be taken:

- A £25 million Technology Capability Fund is being provided to Teagasc to develop its research infrastructure in the biotechnology area. This investment will enable Teagasc together with the Universities and Bioresearch Ireland to compete effectively for a significant level of funding from the Technology Foresight Fund to support a world-class research programme in agri-food biotechnology.
- At EU level and in international fora, Ireland's approach will be positive but precautionary based on scientific risk assessment and management in relation to the general question of GMO technology.
- The management of field trials of GM crops for variety testing and seed certification purposes will be carried out in accordance with detailed protocols drawn up by DAFRD in consultation with the Environmental Protection Agency, and will cover all relevant matters such as location of trials and distances between field trials and related neighbouring crops. If GM crops are approved for marketing DAFRD, in co-operation with other regulatory bodies as appropriate, will devise a programme of managed development.
- The Government will support the introduction of appropriate EU legislation to regulate novel foods and GM animal feed, which should include provisions for the evaluation of safety and efficiency as well as clear labelling.

DEVELOPING INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT) IN THE AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

Section 19.2 of 2010 Report refers

COMMENT

The Information Society Commission shapes the public policy framework for the evolving information society in Ireland. The Commission has produced an action plan, which has been approved by Government. Alongside issues such as the provision of internet access and enabling telecommunications bandwidth, the plan also contains provision for the supply of Government services via the internet.

The White Paper on Rural Development commits the Government to support, under the NDP, a programme of investment in regional development infrastructure, including telecommunications. The NDP provides £120 million to promote investment in advanced telecommunications in areas where it is clear that the market will not deliver sufficient investment, and to support the acceleration of the information society and e-commerce. The Department of Public Enterprise also envisages a study to identify areas which could be prioritised for further investment in telecommunications infrastructure.

The Department of Finance is proposing the development of a Government portal through which the public may access any or all government web-based services. The portal will provide client authentication and encryption facilities for all Government services. Responsibility for this project, entitled REACH, has been given to the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. Co-operation between all Government agencies is ongoing in relation to this project.

DAFRD has recently approved a new IT strategy which incorporates the concept of eGovernment. A core element is the re-engineering of all systems to make them available to clients electronically. DAFRD expects to spend up to £45/50m on this process. On the communication side, the Department has high-speed connection links to all its geographically dispersed locations. These include its own network of offices and, as part of the roll-out of the Cattle Movement Monitoring System (CMMS), links have been established to marts, meat factories and points of export. The Department intends as part of its strategy implementation to make full use of Web technologies. All of its major systems are to be redeveloped to facilitate the electronic delivery of its services. The Animal Health Computer System (AHCS) is at an advanced stage. DAFRD continues to improve its own infrastructure to prepare for electronic service delivery. Its network, computer platforms and internet access capability are all in the process of being upgraded. Substantial additional bandwidth has now been provided to its network.

DAFRD has a very active website, which contains information of interest both to our clients and a wider audience. Details of the Department's schemes and services are given, as well as providing links to a range of related national and international sites.

ACTIONS

- The National Rural Development Forum will regularly monitor ICT development in rural areas as recommended in the AF2010 Report.

- The Government will shortly invite tenders for the implementation of a virtual private network countrywide for both voice and data for the public sector. It is hoped that the placing of such a contract will encourage the telecommunications companies to bring broad bandwidth capacity to even the most remote regions of the country. In so doing the bandwidth will be available to industry/citizens in these areas also.

- As indicated in the sections of the Plan on the development of the food industry, a number of initiatives aimed at developing the e-commerce capabilities of the food industry are being introduced.
- The Government support the Committee's proposal that trade organisations, including retailer, processor and farmer organisations, in the agri-food sector should establish expert groups to examine ICT developments, and to identify and promote best practice.
- The agri-food State bodies are taking the necessary steps to enhance their ICT capabilities both in terms of service to clients and organisational efficiencies. Proposals from them for funding under the Information Society fund for implementation of interactive web based Government services will be encouraged and channelled through DAFRD.
- The redevelopment of the Department's systems, and the web enabling of them, will take place over the next three years. The AHCS (Animal Health Computer System) is likely to be the first interactive web-based computer system to be implemented. It is scheduled for delivery in 2001. This system will allow private veterinary practices to make full use of the internet to communicate directly with the Department's computer systems. In addition, the premia payments area has been identified as a candidate for direct access by individual farmers to allow for the submission of claims electronically.
- DAFRD intends to deploy its services across all of the relevant emerging Web technologies. The Department is participating in the REACH project, which intends to provide a Government portal for citizens to transact their business with all public bodies. As part of the REACH Project, DAFRD will move towards the use of the Personal Public Services Number (PPSN) to allow for more streamlined integrated access to all services through the Web.
- The Department also intends to exploit the new potential for electronic transactions using digital signatures, for which the legal basis is provided in the e-Commerce Bill, when the necessary infrastructure is in place.