



The Save British Science Society

SUPPORTING SCIENCE & THE APPLICATIONS OF SCIENCE

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The need for scientific research to underpin measures of quality of life

SBS evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee of the House of Commons

1. SBS is pleased to submit this short note to the Committee in advance of its scrutiny of the Government's "quality of life" report. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

The need for scientific advice

2. SBS supports the approach set out in the new report that when taking decisions about good government, "it is important to anticipate early on where scientific advice or research is needed, and to identify sources of information of high calibre. Where possible evidence should be viewed from a wide ranging set of viewpoints". As the Minister himself, Michael Meacher MP is quoted in the report, "scientific research is essential".ⁱ

Concerns about DEFRA's level of research

3. For a decade and a half, research has been repeatedly cut in the policy areas for which the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs now has responsibility. When it closed last year, the old Ministry of Agriculture was investing £85.6 million less annually in real terms in research and development than it was in 1986.ⁱⁱ This represented a cut of 42%. This seems bizarre, given that this period has seen scares about *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, *E. coli*, tuberculosis in badgers and cattle, falling fish stocks in the North Sea, foot-and-mouth, BSE and concerns about genetically-modified foods.

4. Official projections show that DEFRA's budget for research is set to rise by just 1% next year.²

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5. SBS fails to understand how this squares with the official position that scientific research and development are “essential” to delivering the Government’s agenda of sustainable development.

6. In the light of the Curry Report on the future of farming, which devoted a whole section to scientific investigation, and stated that “we need a strong drive on research”,ⁱⁱⁱ SBS believes that it is more important than ever than the appropriate department take seriously the need to redress its historic failure to invest in appropriate research.

7. Not only does this failure mean that policy is not properly informed, it also places “serious pressures”^{iv} on the budgets of other bodies that are forced to step in to fill the gap.

A lack of response from DEFRA.

8. In December 2001, SBS wrote to eight Government Departments that undertake research and development, asking about how they would prioritise scientific research in their bids to the spending review. We attach a copy of the letter sent to DEFRA, and a copy of a follow-up letter sent when no response had been received by the end of February 2002.

9. To date, no response has been received, although detailed letters have been received from six of the other seven Departments that were contacted. SBS sincerely hopes that this does not mean that DEFRA is less concerned about its scientific programme than other departments are about theirs.

May 2002

Notes and references

ⁱ *Second Government Annual Report on Sustainable Development*, Stationery Office, 2002.

ⁱⁱ *Forward Look 2001: Government funded science, engineering and technology*, Stationery Office, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Farming and Food: A sustainable future*, DEFRA, 2002.

^{iv} *Government Expenditure on Research & Development: The Forward Look*, Fifth Report, Session 1999-2000, Volume II. House of Commons Science & Technology Committee.