

# BIOSCIENCES FEDERATION



INSTITUTE  
OF BIOLOGY



British Ecological Society

The Use of Science in Defra  
Invitation to frame the inquiry of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee

27 March 2008

## About us

The **Biosciences Federation** (BSF) is a single authority representing the UK's biological expertise, providing independent opinion to inform public policy and promoting the advancement of the biosciences. The Federation brings together the strengths of 44 member organisations (plus seven associate members), including the Institute of Biology and the British Ecological Society.

The **Institute of Biology** (IOB) is an independent and charitable body charged by Royal Charter to further the study and application of the UK's biology and allied biosciences. IOB has 14,000 individual members and many specialist learned Affiliated Societies.

Together, BSF and IOB represent a cumulative membership of over 65,000 individuals, covering the full spectrum of biosciences from physiology and neuroscience, biochemistry and microbiology, to ecology, taxonomy and environmental science.

The **British Ecological Society** (BES) is the learned society for ecology in the UK. Founded in 1913 and with over 4,000 members, the BES supports ecologists and promotes ecology; the study of living things and their relationship with the environment in which they live. The Society's mission is to advance ecology and make it count.

## Authors of this response

This response was developed through the IOB/BSF Environment, Agriculture and Sustainability committee and the Public and Policy Committee of the British Ecological Society.

## Openness

The IOB, BSF and the BES welcome the opportunity to respond to this call for information and are happy for this submission to be made publicly available. Should the Committee have any questions about this submission, please direct them to Ceri Margerison, Policy Officer, the British Ecological Society ([Ceri@BritishEcologicalSociety.org](mailto:Ceri@BritishEcologicalSociety.org), telephone 020 7877 0740)

## Topics to Consider

The IOB, BSF and the BES would like to see the EFRA Committee examine the following issues as part of its inquiry, in addition to those named in the Committee's initial call for information. We are strongly supportive of the Committee's decision to include Defra's agencies within the scope of the inquiry. Throughout we take 'Defra' to mean both the Department and organisations in the Defra 'family'.

### *Commissioning Research*

1. Is Defra an intelligent customer for procuring research from internal and external contractors?
2. Does Defra support the right strategic science to inform policy, including long-term research (5-10 years in duration)?
3. The tension between research freedom, for scientists wishing to pursue interesting lines of enquiry, and the provision of funding by Defra for target-oriented projects.
4. Does Defra feel its approach to its work gives it access to the best scientific minds and appropriate access to scientific networks? If it does not, what plans does it have to gain access to such resources – including support for national infrastructure and the development of a skilled workforce?
5. Does Defra make adequate use of Horizon-scanning to identify novel threats and opportunities for which environmental science will be needed in the future<sup>1</sup>? *For example; extreme events, outbreaks of disease, food security and agricultural productivity. How can opportunities be created for the UK research community and Defra work together to tackle these?*
6. When commissioning reviews of evidence, how does Defra ensure a repeatable and critical assessment that uses methodology designed to minimise error and bias, such as that used routinely in health care?

### *Using Research*

7. Who are Defra's main research partners and what do such partnerships bring to the work of Defra? What does Defra bring to the partnerships in terms of knowledge, policy context and financial investment?
8. How does Defra strike a balance between science inputs to the evidence base and inputs from other forms of evidence (such as opinion)?

### *Structure and Governance*

9. Is Defra's structure too complex; does it allow for the best possible co-ordination and use of science within the Department? *The 'silo-based organisation of Defra has the potential to stymie the initiation and development of cross-cutting projects.*
10. How open is Defra currently to the use of peer-review for grant funding and contracts? *Mechanisms for engaging the scientific community with peer-review in this context could be explored.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sutherland, WJ et al (2008) Future novel threats and opportunities facing UK biodiversity identified by horizon scanning. Journal of Applied Ecology. <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1365-2664.2008.01474.x>

11. The role of the Defra Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) in the Department's decision-making and policy-making, the degree of the post-holder's access to Ministers and the level of the research budget at their disposal.
12. The relationship between Defra and the devolved administrations including: the relationship between the Defra CSA and scientific advisors in devolved government; the relationship between Defra and environmental research institutes in the devolved nations (i.e. Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research and the Scottish Government Rural and Environment Research and Analysis Directorate (RERAD) research providers).

### *Policy-making*

13. The relationship between the policy-making process in Defra and Government and overall UK science policy. *At which points in the policy making process is scientific advice sought? How and to what degree are Ministers able take account of scientific evidence? .Is Defra's science framework sufficiently detached from political pressure and 'spin'?*
14. How will the new Committee on Climate Change be supported by science and research and to what extent will Defra's Ministers be obliged to accept advice from the Committee?

### *Funding*

15. Budget cuts and frequent re-organisation within Defra. *Nationally significant science projects and skilled teams of experts must be protected long-term, from the negative impacts of organisational change on national capacity and capability.*
16. Does Defra have an adequate science budget to fund the policy-relevant research that it needs, for example within its priority areas of climate change and the ecosystem approach?