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Defra Minister backs plant breeding campaign

Defra science minister Lord de Mauley has given the Government's formal backing to an industry-led campaign to highlight the critical role of plant breeding innovation and quality seed in supporting a competitive farming industry and a dynamic value chain.

The PVR campaign, launched jointly by BSPB and AIC earlier this year, focuses on the importance of Plant Variety Rights (PVR) as a unique form of intellectual property which helps to protect, stimulate and reward progress in crop improvement.

Speaking at the BSPB Annual Dinner at the Royal Society in London earlier this week, Lord de Mauley said:

"I am very pleased to endorse the campaign initiated by BSPB and AIC to highlight the need for continued investment in plant breeding as the starting point in the UK's £90 billion food supply chain. This initiative chimes exactly with the Government's own aim to improve the competitiveness of UK agriculture through innovation. Investment in plant breeding offers one of the best opportunities to create additional value within the agri-food chain, not only through increased yields and production efficiency, but also through improvements in quality and seasonality.

"Continued investment in a dynamic, innovative and profitable plant breeding sector will be essential for the UK to meet the objectives set out in the Government's forthcoming Agri-Tech Strategy, and for the agri-food sector to contribute effectively to the global challenges of food security and sustainable development," he added.



Defra Minister Lord de Mauley (left) and newly elected BSPB chairman Dr Richard Summers alongside the new PVR campaign trademark

Central to the PVR campaign is a new EU-registered PVR trademark, which is already starting to appear throughout the seed trade on seed bags, stationery, invoices, web-sites and other marketing material – serving as a prominent reminder of the research, innovation and independent testing behind each new variety and bag of purchased seed. More than 70 companies across the UK plant breeding and seeds sector have now signed up to use the trademark, which is supported by a campaign web-site at www.plantvarietyrights.org providing more detailed information about Plant Variety Rights, variety testing, seed production and certification.

Welcoming Lord de Mauley's support for the PVR campaign, newly elected BSPB chairman Dr Richard Summers reiterated the plant breeding industry's call for strategic, long-term investment in properly-targeted research to help bridge the gaps between advances in basic plant science and their translation into industry-facing research outputs:

“Plant breeding is already a highly research-intensive activity, investing around one-third of total income in R&D. This compares favourably with any other industrial sector – 15% in the pharmaceuticals sector for example, 10% in the software industry, and less than 5% in the automotive, food and electronics sectors.

“But royalty income to plant breeders, while consistent, is relatively inelastic and provides little scope for investment in the kind of speculative, long-term research which will deliver the step-change improvements in yield, climate resilience, pest and disease resistance needed to meet future food security and sustainable development goals.

“There is an urgent need to develop new investment streams to support these activities through the forthcoming Agri-Tech Strategy. The Government's clear recognition of the importance of plant breeding and seed innovation is therefore extremely welcome at this critical time leading up to the Strategy's publication,” he concluded.

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