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Agricultural Situation

Never mind Climate Change; It's the Coming Food Crisis says Chief UK Advisor

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Report Highlights:

The newly appointed UK Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and Head of the Government Office for Science presented a scenario that would overshadow "climate change." He talked of an impending "food crisis" that would need pragmatic, scientific, and proactive solutions in order to head off the problem. While his speech was generally bold, it most interestingly called for advanced agricultural technology (biotechnology) to be part of the solution.

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In a speech to the Govnet's Sustainable Development UK Conference John Beddington, the newly appointed UK Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and Head of the Government Office for Science, addressed the factors that he believes are influencing global food prices. These include Asian affluence, population growth, biofuels, drought and floods, energy and transport costs.¹ These in turn could lead to a global food crisis.

His claims are not in isolation; in just the last year there have been global reports of consumer backlash against high food prices. The World Food Program has had to decide whether food aid would need to be stopped or rationed if new donations did not arrive at the agency in the short term² and issued warnings of hunger in Jamaica, Nepal and the Philippines. With soaring prices for basic foods, some governments are stepping in to artificially control the cost of bread, corn, rice and dairy products. Even in the UK, stories of "agflation" are increasingly appearing in the media.

Beddington reserves the toughest criticism for the biofuels industry, which he believes has compounded the problem of high world food prices. In his speech, he notes the factors increasing global food prices and shortages:³

Asian Affluence

Asians (primarily China and India) are eating more meat and dairy products, creating higher demand for wheat, soy and corn for animal feed.

Population growth

The current world population is 6.7 billion and is projected to reach 9 billion by 2050. Arable land lost to development adds to the increasing burden of producing enough food to feed a growing population.

Biofuels

Government policies and incentives favor the production of biofuels, which in turn compete for cropland in food production. EU energy ministers have agreed to increase the share of biofuels used in transport to 10% by 2020. Meanwhile, studies have emerged recently which question the environmental benefits of biofuels, and the UK government wants to check that UK and European biofuel targets will not cause more problems than they solve.⁴

Drought and floods

Climate change is threatening the world's breadbaskets, such as Australia, which has suffered seven years of drought cutting wheat exports. Floods in Britain last summer reduced dairy output, helping to raise milk and cheese prices.

Energy and transport costs

Crude oil prices have risen, raising the price of diesel for farmers. There is a global shortage of nitrate fertilizers, which use natural gas as a raw material. High demand for bulk carriers has driven up the cost of grain transport by sea.

Beddington was particularly concerned about biofuels. He stated that some governments claim them to be the answer to energy security and global warming. At a time when farmers should be ramping up agricultural production for food they are instead being encouraged to cultivate fuel. The land needed for growing biofuels is directly competing with land needed for growing food crops or grazing for livestock, which aids to the imbalance between

¹ Professor John Beddington, Chief Scientific Adviser to HM Government, "Sustainability in a Changing World" SDUK 08, London, 6 March 2008

² BBC NEWS "UN warns over food aid rationing" http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/7262830.stm

³ THE TIMES, March 7 2008, News pgs. 6-7, "Rush for biofuels threatens starvation on a global scale"

⁴ The Guardian, February 22 2008, Environment, "Ministers order review of biofuels"

production and consumption, favoring the latter. Beddington argues "There are real problems with the unsustainability of biofuels," he said, adding that cutting down rainforest to grow the crops was "profoundly stupid".² Factoring in the changing eating habits in China and India, the world's two fastest-growing economies, Beddington recognizes the pressure on existing food stocks as being unsustainable.

John Beddington can see this confluence of factors overshadowing "climate change" as the major issue of the day. He believes global food and feed shortages will be more of an issue than that mentioned previously.⁵ However, he offers that human ingenuity is extraordinary and he is confident that food production could be boosted, including by growing genetically modified crops.²

Beddington is a specialist in the economics and biology of sustainable management of renewable resources. He has previously advised UK ministers on scientific and environmental issues. He previously chaired the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' science advisory panel and the Defense Scientific Advisory Committee, and is a member of the Natural Environmental Research Council. He has also advised the European Commission and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

This speech is significant in that it calls for pragmatic, scientific, and proactive solutions to the perceived pending food crisis. While the UK is widely accepted to be pro-science, this sentiment has not been largely voiced in recent memory. It is particularly significant to hear the UK's Chief Scientist specifically cite biotechnology among the tools to combat global food balances.

Beddington, however, is not a policy maker; he is supposed to be a neutral (i.e., apolitical) competent authority. It has yet to be seen if the UK government will take heed of his recommendations. Even if it does, it is but one voice in a sea of 27 EU countries, a group that as a whole tends to be preoccupied with the multifunctionality of agricultural lands and finding ways to keep advanced agricultural innovations away from its farmers and research companies. It will be interesting to see whether the UK continues its "wait and see" approach or expends political and economic capital within the EU body on their pro-science stance. Ultimately, this could answer whether this perceived food crisis as stated by this leading UK scientist is a real threat or is it just a "tempest in a teapot?"

⁵ The Guardian, March 7 2008, Science pg. 17, "Food crisis will take hold before climate change, warns chief scientist"