# **Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)**

Minutes of meeting, 11 January 2023

**Actions arising** 

Action number	Action	Owner

# 1. Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed attendees, apologies are recorded in Annex A.

## 2. CSA Update

The SAC were informed about the formation of a new Independent Science Advisory Group (SAG) to investigate Crustacean deaths in the north-east of England, who will report their findings to the Secretary of State. An update was also provided on the Independent SAG investigating the current outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza.

The SAC were informed about the current neonicotinoid (a neuro-active insecticide) season. There is a regular emergency authorisation request for use on sugar beets. The decision on this should be made by ministers shortly. The CSA informed the SAC that due to the use of neonicotinoids last year on sugar beets Defra were able to collect data and assess the implications of their use, which has not been possible in previous years.

The CSA provided the following updates:

- 1. The SAC were informed about the <u>Plant biosecurity strategy</u> for the UK which was published on Monday.
- 2. The <u>Genetic Technology Precision</u> bill is currently progressing through Parliament.
- 3. The ongoing work on retained European Union law which is looking at regulatory reform to try and make it easier to use science for strategic advantage.

# 3. CBD Update

Defra provided a short report from the United Nation Biodiversity Conference (COP 15), which was also a follow up to discussions with the SAC in September 2022. COP 15 concluded on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December 2022 with adoption of the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework, which includes ambitious targets for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and a package for nature finance. It also includes a rigorous process for planning, monitoring, reporting and review, including a set of indicators to be implemented by all Parties to the Convention. The SAC were asked for their views on how the science community can be involved in the implementation of the outcomes both internationally and in the United Kingdom (UK), as well as how Defra can align science investments to better support the monitoring and review process.

The CSA shared that both ministers and Defra were positive about the outcomes of COP 15. The SAC also felt the outcomes of COP 15 were good news and it was felt science could help in defining the management actions needed to achieve outcomes for ecosystem services. Including providing more habitat specific detail, as well as how monitoring should be designed to help determine if targets have been reached.

Defra clarified that the targets are not legally binding, but parties are requested to update national targets to ensure transparency. The SAC questioned how different indicators will be developed across the UK nations. In response Defra shared that a technical expert group has been set up to do further work on this topic and collect more research. The SAC queried Defra's research priorities and whether they had considered looking at blind spots in biodiversity e.g., freshwater biodiversity; in response Defra shared that they are currently looking at research priorities and monitoring.

## 4. Biodiversity SAG

Defra updated the SAC on the proposed new Biodiversity Expert Group (BEG) and asked the SAC for feedback on the proposed areas of expertise that the group should cover. The group will replace the Biodiversity Targets Advisory Group (BTAG), a time-limited subgroup of the Science Advisory Council (SAC), which provided useful expert advice on developing the evidence base for the domestic biodiversity targets. The BEG will have a wider, cross-departmental focus on biodiversity, covering several related policy areas. Its scope will cover international, terrestrial, freshwater, and marine biodiversity. BEG members will provide independent expert advice and scientific support to Defra specialists and policy makers in matters related to biodiversity. The BEG aims to recruit an interdisciplinary group of 8-12 members with a diverse range of expertise. The SAC were asked for their opinion on the most important expertise required in the group to cover the policy areas.

The SAC noted that the 30% target for biodiversity is viewed with some caution by social scientists/development experts due to the possible negative impacts on marginalised communities. Ensuring this is rolled out correctly will be crucial in getting community support and ensuring its success. The SAC also felt that Defra should not be looking at the economic perspective as just costs but also about providing positive incentives to encourage private landowners to have more biodiversity on their land. Defra felt that an economists support on the BEG would be useful in helping address the issue of positive incentives.

The SAC suggested Defra investigate the impacts of biodiversity from supply chains by looking at life cycle analysis at a macro level i.e. using screening analysis to find hotspots and using this to do further in depth analysis. The SAC also felt there was a need for an independent critical expert on biodiversity policy who can look at not just Biodiversity Net Gain, but also areas like 30 by 30, biodiversity carbon interface and biodiversity and agricultural policy interface. Defra noted that behavioural insights and human behaviour needs to be considered in terms of delivery, as well as the impacts of climate change, particularly adaptation costs.

The SAC felt that having a network of experts to call on for the BEG may be helpful. The SAC emphasised the value of seeking out experts in the social science and

humanities disciplines who could provide insights upstream e.g., in the framing of problems and potential solutions rather than solely in the context of delivery as well as providing insight on environmental ethics. It was also felt that looking at a systems approach would be beneficial to the BEG.

# 5. Work plan and any other business

The SAC chair noted a discussion on Water would be brought to the March principal meeting. No other business was raised.

# **Annex A: Attendees and apologies SAC Members**

Louise Heathwaite (Chair)

Lisa Collins

Richard Bardgett

Peter Cox

Nick Hanley

Marian Scott

Rosie Hails

Felix Eigenbrod

Susan Owens

Lin Field

### Defra Chief Scientific Adviser's Office

Gideon Henderson - Chief Scientific Adviser Lucy Foster – Interim Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser SAC Secretariat

#### **Devolved administration observers**

Caryl Williams – Welsh Government Observer Paul Devine - Northern Irish Government Observer

### Defra officials in relation to specific agenda discussion

International Biodiversity and Wildlife National Biodiversity Programme

### **Apologies**

Rowland Kao – SAC member Alistair Carson – Northern Irish Government Observer Matthew Williams – Scottish Government Observer