

## CONFERENCE REVIEWS

### Integrated Agricultural Systems: Methodologies, Modelling and Measuring, SAC, Edinburgh, 2-4 June 2009



The goal of the conference was to improve our understanding of how changes in the biophysical, economic and social environment are likely to impact on agricultural production and ecosystem services, and the wider implications for society, for example through the development of policy. The conference was jointly organised by the AAB, the Agricultural Economics Society and the British Society for Animal Science which allowed us to explore the interactions between these areas. The conference explored the tools of the trade in relation to climate change, food security, and impacts of agriculture on the environment, animal health and welfare.

The key topics were (i) Multi-functionality of land-use; (ii) carbon management; (iii) analysis across-scales; (iv) integrated assessment; (v) tools for analysing farm systems and (vi) Public Goods from farming systems and contrasting farming systems. A key theme was the lessons to be learned in the context of providing the evidence required by policy-makers. Experiences of the issues were shared between economists, agricultural scientists, climate change specialists, integrated scientists and people working in the policy arena. Although most of the 76 participants came from the UK some came from as far afield as Africa, New Zealand and Australia.

Professor Maggie Gill, Chief Scientific Adviser for Rural Affairs and Environment to the Scottish Government, opened the conference by challenging us to think of the requirements of the policy-makers when formulating our research plans. There were many stimulating papers and useful discussions within and out-with the sessions. A key message from the conference was that well developed integrated approaches are essential in order to assess the effects of agricultural policy and regulations.

The final session consisted of a panel discussion chaired by Professor John Oldham. The panel members were Sinclair Mayne, Departmental Scientific Adviser with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland, Dominic Moran, Environmental Economist, SAC and Graham Russell, University of Edinburgh. During this discussion, it became clear that researchers need to be more proactive in their discussions with policy-makers as scientists are seen by policy-makers to have a role in not only helping to provide answers to the questions but in framing the questions themselves. This investment in time at the start

of a project can pay dividends later. If research is to be of use in framing policy scientists need to assess issues such that they may not previously have considered such as the trade-offs between public and private goods, the efficiency of measures and the equity of the outcomes of their research. Policy-makers dislike conflicting information, and often require quick answers to their questions.

Increased money allocated to the development of tools to answer policy-led questions, professional recognition of interdisciplinary work, and easier access to data and training were all identified as important issues. It became clear that much progress had been made in putting interdisciplinary research on a sound intellectual footing and that barriers between disciplines are being broken down, although there is still much to do. There is an emerging discipline of integrated science with its own best practice procedures. For example, setting the boundaries in an inter-disciplinary project is crucial, and is dependent on the purpose and the scale at which the decision will be made.

The conference dinner was a barbeque, which was held on the first night and included locally produced lamb from SAC's Boghall Farm. The organisers heaved a collective sigh of relief when the forecast for a dry evening turned out to be correct. A lot of good discussion took place outside and the format allowed participants to move from group to group. The following night, many of the delegates met for a meal in the Edinburgh Hard Rock Café which was followed for those with stamina by a few drinks in a traditional Edinburgh pub.

Scientifically the conference was a success. We benefited from the experience of scientists who worked with policy-makers in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and Australia and hope that progress in this important topic will be rapid. There were clear benefits from the three societies working together, and hope that this collaboration will be further developed. *Aspects of Applied Biology* **93** is recommended reading for all interested in this topic but who were unable to attend the conference (available from <http://www.aab.org.uk>).

*AAB, the British Society for Animal Science and the Agricultural Economics Society. June, 2009*