

Influencing Government

The IOB Science Policy Committees aim to influence Government policy on issues of relevance to biologists. The sheer diversity of these issues makes our job extremely varied and interesting. We have responded to several recent consultations by Government departments and by the Parliamentary select committees which hold Government to account.

On the subject of **genomic medicine**, we told the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee that “the increasing application of genomic information raises significant ethical issues surrounding prediction of future morbidity and mortality, and subsequent genetic discrimination”. We consider that genome data should be afforded the same level of security and privacy as existing medical records, provided that the existing security of such information is fit for purpose.

On **greener homes for the future**, IOB told the Environmental Audit Committee that the planning regime is currently unfit for the purpose of taking a full account of the impacts of house-building on our environmental assets. The Ecotown initiative, although a step in the right direction, falls well short of what could be achieved. Truly sustainable urban development is much more than ‘zero-carbon’ housing. We recommended that all Government departments should adopt the ecosystems approach, as a first attempt at understanding and reducing the environmental impacts of development proposals.

The other consultations we have contributed to recently were: a review of science in the Food Standards Agency; carbon capture and storage; the Government’s renewables strategy; and halting UK biodiversity loss. You can find the full text of the responses at: www.iob.org/consultations2008

Soil protection

In July, we joined a number of professional bodies, learned societies and research organisations in writing to Environment Secretary Hilary Benn for the second time, urging him to support the EU **Soil Framework Directive** when it

is discussed in October. The UK had not felt able to support it last year. Scientific evidence unequivocally supports the case for improved protection of European soils. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that an effective legal framework exists to protect especially the most versatile and valuable soil systems.

Although soil may be located in one member state, the effects of poor protection and management impact more widely. The importance of soil systems to carbon, water resource and biodiversity management at continental scale is constantly underlined in the scientific literature. The loss of highly productive soil to urban expansion is materially reducing capacity for food production, which is of strategic concern to us all.

We were therefore disappointed that the Secretary of State replied: “I do not feel that the proposals currently on the table would enable the UK to meet its policy objectives for protecting soils in the most effective way.”

The correspondence can be found at www.iob.org/soil

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Photo: Laura Bellingan