



**Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK**

Opening address

***‘Plants for the Future’:  
A strategic research agenda for European  
research in plant genomics and  
biotechnology***

**Press launch of the strategic research agenda  
for the ‘Plants for the Future’ Technology Platform**

*Strasbourg – 5 July 2005*

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## **Introduction**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I am here today to announce the launch of the strategic research agenda of the Technology Platform “Plants for the Future”. Following the presentation of a joint vision paper just one year ago by my predecessor Philippe Busquin, this marks another important milestone in the development of this platform.

Much has happened in this past year.

## **New Lisbon Strategy**

In March, the Council of Ministers fully endorsed the Commission’s proposals to re-launch the Lisbon strategy; that is to make Europe the most competitive, knowledge-based economy in the world.

The aim is to re-invigorate Lisbon by focusing on growth and employment in a stronger partnership with Member States.

Building the knowledge society and leveraging knowledge and innovation for growth is at the heart of this renewed Lisbon strategy.

Europe has to concentrate its efforts on its true strengths if it wants to face the mounting competition from the global economy in a sustainable way.

Markets are becoming increasingly global and knowledge-intensive. Only by raising the knowledge capacity of our firms can we base our

competitive advantage on providing the best new products, processes and services in the world.

This is why our true factor of competitiveness lies in our brains and our creativity. It is “knowledge” in the broadest sense of the word.

In Europe, we need to become much better at the way we produce knowledge through research, at the way we diffuse knowledge through education, and at the way we use and apply knowledge through innovation.

In addition to national and regional actions, both from the public and private sectors, the Community’s Framework Programme for Research is a vital element in achieving these aims.

Strategic research agenda are precisely the tools we need to ensure that we focus our research funding on areas of research that present a high degree of industrial relevance. It is not simply a question of channelling more Community funds to industry, but rather of ensuring that EU research policy responds to industry’s needs.

In April, we presented our proposal for the 7th Framework Programme which will run from 2007 to 2013. I am proud to say that the strategic thematic priorities that are identified in our proposal strongly reflect the needs that have been identified by the Technology Platforms, including by that on “Plants for the future”.

## **FP7 and the Financial Perspectives**

Above all, our proposal for the 7th Framework Programme is designed to help realise our renewed Lisbon objectives linked to knowledge for growth and jobs. The scale and importance of the role of research in achieving these objectives is reflected in the proposal to double the EU's budget for research.

Until recently, I have been very much encouraged by the positive reception that this proposal has received. As well as the strong backing of the European Parliament, we have received very positive responses from the scientific community and industry.

However, I must say that I remain deeply frustrated by the mixed signals that were sent out by the last European Council. On the one hand, the failure to agree on what in the end was a very minimal proposal for the Europe's financial perspectives in the years 2007-2013 showed a lack of vision and ambition in the quest to create a Europe of knowledge.

On the other hand, several Heads of State argued strongly that the EU must focus more on knowledge, and specifically more on research, than would be allowed by the compromise solution that was offered to them.

It is this commitment to do more for knowledge and for research that gives me hope for the future. I am convinced that the only sustainable future for Europe lies in upgrading its knowledge assets and leveraging them for economic growth and social progress.

Investing in research is therefore not an option for Europe, it is a necessity. A compromise that cuts the budget for R&D may seem the least painful solution today, but it will hurt us most in the longer run.

- It would jeopardise our commitment to reach the 3 % target for R&D investment.
- It would erode the EU's ability to address new science and technology challenges and opportunities, including in the area of plant biotechnology, but also hydrogen, nanoelectronics, etc.
- It would encourage the knowledge-based companies and universities of the future to relocate and invest outside Europe. This is largely happening already in the area of plant biotechnology, a recent example being the relocation from Syngenta's plant biotech R&D facility from the UK to the US.
- It would seriously undermine the message that we must send to our researchers, our companies, our SMEs, our universities, our students and many others, that today's Union is a strong and future-oriented Union that belongs to them.

### **Plants for the Future: The strategic research agenda**

Irrespective of what happens in the context of the Financial Perspectives, Technology Platforms are set to become champions of knowledge for growth.

The first draft of the strategic research agenda presented today by the Technology Platform "Plants for the Future" demonstrates this in an

impressive way. It is a joint effort to which all relevant actors along the agricultural production chain have contributed:

- The plant science community, through its European organisation EPSO.
- The biotech industry, represented by EuropaBio.
- Farmers and cooperatives, represented through Copa-Cogeca.
- Relevant industries including seed, food, feed, chemical, forestry.
- Experts and organisations representing various other stakeholders such as consumer, regulators, the financial sphere and NGOs.

The participation of this wide range of stakeholders has been crucial to identifying and taking into account scientific and technological potential, market drivers and consumer demands, and to creating an awareness of the challenges that this sector is facing.

The strategic research agenda outlines the research that can contribute to addressing major socio-economic challenges:

- To fulfil consumer demand for safe, sustainable and healthy food.

Novel plants aim at delivering non-allergic foods and foods with longer shelf lives, better nutritional composition and more varied tastes.

- To increase agricultural productivity while decreasing its environmental footprint

Novel plants may need less input in terms of water, fertilizer or pesticides and will be more stress resistant, for instance against draught or seasonal instabilities caused by climate change.

- To exploit the potential of biomass for the production of industrial materials

Plants (crops or trees) or plant waste will in the future be an important source for the production of energy, biofuels and biopolymers, replacing the use of fossil fuels as feedstock. The production of novel, high-value added materials will be possible in “plant factories”.

In addition, the strategic research agenda also touches upon important, horizontal issues, such as the creation of a virtual training centre for plant scientists, or further research that is necessary to ensure co-existence of different farming practises.

The call for increasing public and private investment in plant sciences is timely. While Europe pioneered the world-wide development of plant biotechnology in the 80s and 90s, research into the commercial use of plant biotechnology in Europe has now fallen behind that of its major competitors.

Europe must increase investment in this area if it wants to retain its science base, strengthen its competitiveness and exploit the full potential of plant biotechnology in terms of job creation and the benefits it can bring to European consumers and to our environment.

Let me take as an example the area of bio-fuels. By replacing fossil-fuels, there is less dependence on foreign resources (energy-security) and reduced environmental impact through lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In Europe, bio-fuels should reach 5.75 % of all transportation fuel by 2010 according to the bio-fuels directive of 2003, which also stresses the need for promoting research in this area. While no concrete targets for research expenditures are given, the US National Security and Bio-Energy Act of this year allocates 1 billion US \$ over the next 5 years to this area, 20% of which is reserved for development of advanced and dedicated crops and crop production methods. A mature US biomass industry is expected to create over 1 million jobs.

There is currently no dedicated programme of comparable size at European or Member State level supporting this type of research – although biomass production for bio-fuels could also have a positive impact on rural development, in particular for the large agricultural regions in the new Member States.

### **Refining and implementing the strategic research agenda**

With the publication of the strategic research agenda, a first important step has been taken.

The Commission's proposal for the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme already covers some of the strategic objectives outlined in this agenda within the theme "Food, agriculture and biotechnology", which supports the development of what we call the European knowledge based bio-economy.

We understand the term “bio-economy” as including all industries and economic sectors that produce, manage and otherwise exploit biological resources (such as agriculture, food, forestry, fisheries) and related services, supply or consumer industries. Already today, these industries have a total annual turn-over of € 1.5 trillion, largely depending on raw materials delivered by plant resources such as crops and trees.

The Framework Programme is, however, just one instrument in implementing this ambitious agenda. Public authorities at national and regional levels have to be mobilised to participate in this joint effort. Synergies between European and national investments, and between public and private efforts, now have to be created.

I understand that the leaders of this Technology Platform have decided to organise larger consultation meetings in all European Member States within the next 12 months, involving all relevant national stakeholders and authorities. The objective is to discuss the strategic research agenda and possible national and regional contributions towards its implementation, both public and private.

In view of the national differences - in the fabric of the industrial and agricultural sector, in attitudes towards plant biotechnology, and in research priorities - this wider consultation may prove to be useful in creating a stronger sense of ownership on a national level. I expect that by the first half of 2006 a detailed roadmap and implementation plan covering the next 5 years will be available, in time for the start of FP7.

## **Conclusion**

As I have emphasised today, knowledge for growth must and will be at the core of the 7th Framework Programme. Making the programme more relevant for industry is a vital part of this, and Technology Platforms have an important role to play in making this happen.

The cultivation of plants some 10,000 years ago was the starting point of modern civilisation. Today, plants play an ever increasing role for providing safe and healthy food for a growing world population and for replacing limited, and expensive, fossil-resources as feedstock for the production of energy and industrial materials. The transition to a sustainable economy based largely on renewable biological resources - the “knowledge-based bio-economy” - is as inevitable as it is desirable.

Research and technology initiatives in plant genomics and biotechnology, as outlined in the strategic research agenda published today, will play a major role in achieving this transition. I wish the Technology Platform every success in implementing this important strategy.

Thank you for your attention.