

## Embracing technology is vital for EU agriculture

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Opinion

As the future shape of EU agricultural policy begins to be debated once more, industry must have its say for it to be fit-for-purpose, writes Jim Nicholson.



**Jim Nicholson** | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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In all walks of life, technology is continuously evolving. When I was first elected to the European Parliament back in 1989, MEPs had access to what was then cutting-edge technology: a fax machine. Since then, of course, everything has changed and not just in the office. Farming has kept pace with other industries in embracing the digital age.

Technology has advanced in such a way that farmers are now able to instantly receive and access information regarding individual animals on their farm or global market developments via their smartphones.

This should come as no surprise.

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For centuries, farmers have innovated, using new technologies and selective breeding to remain competitive and improve the efficiency and profitability of their businesses.

Embracing and adopting technology and innovation is vital if European agriculture is to meet the challenges the sector faces, and will face, throughout the 21st century, on many fronts.

First, with the world population estimated to reach nearly 10 billion by 2050, there will be around 2.4 billion more mouths to feed.

At the same time, consumers across Europe and beyond rightly expect their food to be produced to high standards, in terms of food safety and animal welfare while also being environmentally sustainable. On top of this, there is increased global competition for inputs including land and water, making the drive for greater resource efficiency increasingly more important.

My colleague in the ECR group and fellow member of the agriculture committee, Anthea McIntyre, authored an excellent report on meeting these challenges. She rightly pointed out that new technology plays a vital role in addressing these challenges, but that 'more technology' is in itself not enough; it has to be accessible and affordable for producers to realise any concrete benefit.

As the report states, "Farmers are the major stewards of the environment in Europe and need continued access to innovation and research, enabling them to produce food, feed and other products in a sustainable and more cost-effective way, while protecting the environment for future generations and enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem services".

In a number of areas, agriculture is already facing up to these challenges; indeed, innovation within the sector is showing no signs of slowing. Precision agriculture, the use of drone and other cutting-edge technologies, are helping farmers and growers produce food for a growing population with a more targeted and efficient use of inputs.

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a major issue facing global policymakers and agriculture is playing its part in responding to this challenge. For example, producers, in conjunction with the veterinary profession and wider industry, have been working to help tackle AMR by developing new livestock management practices that can dramatically reduce the use of antibiotics. These include initiatives in the pig sector that focus on improving pig gut health.

While the industry has, by its very nature, a track record of adapting and responding to challenges, how the policy landscape is developed is also important. EU programmes, most notably its flagship research and innovation programme Horizon 2020, supporting and encouraging innovation by

facilitating collaboration between academics, institutions and businesses. In terms of the common agricultural policy (CAP), Pillar II funds have been used by member states and regions to improve farm and processor efficiency.

Rural development programmes have also promoted the sharing of knowledge and best practice between farmers through the likes of focus farms and exchanges.

From a UK perspective, I welcome Prime Minister Theresa May signalling her intention to maintain close links with the EU27 in relation to science, research and innovation once the UK has exited the EU.

Further developing these important research and collaboration links in any sphere of R&D, including agriculture, ultimately benefit us all.

The UK government recently announced £90m of funding in agri-tech, with the aim of boosting productivity in British agriculture by improving implementation of new technology within the industry.

This initiative, part of a wider industrial strategy, rightly acknowledges the importance of knowledge transfer - innovation in any industry only bears fruit when it is put into practice by businesses; this is equally true within food and farming. It is therefore vital to support agribusinesses to help the rollout of new technology and share knowledge.

Other factors that impact upon the effective use of new technology are skills and access to broadband. As part of this particular package of funding, the UK government has recognised the need to invest in skills and training and to improve broadband provision in rural areas, helping maximise the benefits of research and innovation. Although a UK initiative the issues this particular funding seeks to address are undoubtedly relevant in agriculture EU-wide.

As the future shape of EU agricultural policy and research programmes begin to be debated once more it will be important that the policy framework is developed in conjunction with the industry for it to make it fit-for-purpose, gain maximum buy-in from farmers and - crucially - to have the best chance of ensuring that innovative ideas and new technologies are successfully translated into reality.

## **About the author**

Jim Nicholson (ECR, UK) is a member of Parliament's agriculture and rural development committee

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[Agriculture](#) [5]

[Environment](#) [6]

[European Commission](#) [7]

[Research and Innovation](#) [8]

## **Categories**

[Agriculture and rural affairs](#) [9]

[Environment](#) [10]

[Science, technology and research](#) [11]



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- [Editorial Calendar](#)
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- [5] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/agriculture>
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