

## EGN cross-Centre meetings on the Politics of Plants

### *Genomics Forum (Edinburgh), 20 & 21 April 2009*

The Forum plans to host two meetings on the bio-based economy and GM for interested researchers across the EGN (including PIs, postdoctoral researchers and graduate students):

**Monday 20 April** (11am–5pm) — **The bio-based economy and the politics of plants**  
**Tuesday 21 April** (10am–4pm) — **'GM redux'**

With the next round of funding for the EGN centres underway, this seems a timely moment to take stock of ongoing and upcoming research across the Network, and to think about how we might exploit cross-Centre synergies relating to these increasingly salient issues.

Objectives of these meetings are:

- To provide an opportunity for EGN researchers to discuss ongoing and upcoming work.
- To identify core themes or questions that cut across multiple EGN research projects.
- To identify whether and how the Forum might help to maximize the value of ongoing EGN research (for example, by facilitating discussions / activities on particular issues, or assisting with the dissemination of key findings).
- To identify whether there is interest in more formal cross-Centre activities over the next 12–24 months.

These meetings are somewhat experimental, but we hope they will prove beneficial for the Centres. The programme will be structured to encourage sharing of information about ongoing research projects and ideas (no extended presentations). Research updates will be followed by more strategic and creative discussions about where there might be synergies worth exploiting, and what types of activities might be productive.

Attached are brief rationales for each of the meetings (detailed programmes to follow). We envisage that the bioeconomy meeting will be broad in scope and lead to the identification of a number of themes or issues that we can discuss how to take forward. The 'GM redux' meeting will be more tightly focused, leading to a series of specific actions designed to monitor and comment on the re-emerging debate around GM in the UK/Europe.

The Forum will cover food and accommodation costs for participants; travel costs should be reimbursed by the Centres.

Please register your interest by filling in the attached form and emailing it to Emma Frow ([emma.frow@ed.ac.uk](mailto:emma.frow@ed.ac.uk)). **The deadline for registration is Monday 30 March 2009.**

## Workshop Overview

### I) The Bio-Based Economy and the Politics of Plants Monday 20 April, 11am–5pm

This meeting is designed for EGN researchers with interests or ongoing projects on topics related to plant biotechnologies and the plant-based bioeconomy. Those with interests in human, animal and microbial bioeconomies are also welcome to participate.

Core objectives for this meeting are to share and discuss EGN research, and to identify areas of possible synergy across Centres and research groups. One potentially productive way of framing the discussion with wider policy and scientific audiences in mind could be in terms of the contemporary ‘politics of plants’ — a theme that has emerged over the course of the Forum’s workstream on plants,<sup>1</sup> and on which we have recently published a short agenda-setting article.<sup>2</sup> This framing is not intended to restrict the discussion, but we would be keen to hear how EGN research might contribute to an understanding of the ‘politics of plants’, such as:

- How are some of the insights, tools and applications of contemporary plant sciences connecting with politically salient issues including climate change, food security, energy security, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development?
- In principle, the push to develop a more bio-based (and less petroleum-dependent) economy could promote a more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable way of life — what is happening in practice?
- How is the ‘value’ of plants (economic, moral, instrumental) changing as we set new priorities and develop new technologies and applications for plants? (e.g. marker-assisted breeding, barcoding technologies, cellulosic biofuels, developing plants able to decontaminate polluted environments, or engineering plants to produce specific therapeutic compounds)
- How are plant politics playing out across different geographical scales?
- How are plant politics being influenced by regulatory and intellectual property frameworks?
- How is plant science research (in the UK, US, worldwide) being shaped by these wider concerns?

During the meeting, participants will have an opportunity to share their research ideas, and to identify cross-cutting themes that might draw together research findings from across the Network.

A more detailed workshop programme will be put together once registrations have been submitted.

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<sup>1</sup> Over the past two-and-a-half years, the Forum’s workstream on plant genomics has comprised a series of workshops, small discussions and public events on topics including conservation and biodiversity, bioenergy, plant breeding and intellectual property, synthetic biology, production and consumption in the bio-based economy, and plant genomics for sustainable development.

<sup>2</sup> Frow, EK et al (2009) [The politics of plants](#). *Food Security* **1(1)**:17–23, DOI:10.1007/s12571-008-0007-6.

## Workshop Overview

### II) 'GM Redux' — EGN Working Group meeting Tuesday 21 April, 10am–4pm

The growing interest in harnessing plant science to help address problems such as climate change and food, energy and water security is resulting in GM and genomic approaches to plant breeding (once more) climbing UK/EU research and policy agendas — evidence of this can be seen in growing numbers of policy-based initiatives, research council priorities, and in the public press.<sup>3</sup>

The EGN has significant research experience relating to social, political, regulatory and environmental debates surrounding the development of GM crop technology. Strategically, it seems an opportune moment to take stock of our current expertise relating to GM, and to think about how we might position ourselves to monitor and to make timely and effective contributions as discussions around GM technologies re-emerge.

The purpose of this meeting is to sound out interest and ideally set up an EGN working group on GM. We will start to think about how these issues are being re-framed in the current context, and develop a strategy for monitoring and contributing as the debate around GM in the UK/Europe re-emerges. Workshops, policy briefings, and proposals for PhD studentships or research projects could be additional objectives for this working group if there is interest.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the Royal Society call for evidence on 'Biological approaches to enhance food crop production' (4 July 2008); <http://royalsociety.org/downloadaddoc.asp?id=5573>, and the Sense About Science report, 'Making sense of GM' (9 Feb 2009); <http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/PDF/MakingSenseofGM.pdf>.