

New international plant science network will boost collaborative research

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A new European Commission-funded network launched at the end of January will coordinate plant science research across Europe and beyond. 26 partners from 23 countries will pool their resources and expertise in order to fund plant science research programmes to help address global challenges such as ensuring food security and providing sustainable bioenergy.

The network, (ERA-NET for Coordinating Action in Plant Sciences – ERA-CAPS) will be coordinated by the UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). It will run until 2014 and is expected to fund two calls for collaborative research projects as well as organising strategic workshops for identifying common priorities and activities around data sharing and open access.

The collaborative projects are expected to investigate fundamental plant biology and science that may have applications including improved crops for food, energy and industrial biotechnology. Projects funded by the network will involve scientists from three or more partner nations with each country funding researchers from their own national institutions.

While the European Commission administers about 10-15% of the public spending in research and innovation in Europe, about 85% is invested by Member States in national research activities. Wider and deeper cooperation between nations is important in order to ensure that research is focused and duplication can be avoided. The networking of organisations and scientists is an important step in tackling these issues.

In order to assist member states in developing partnerships and networks The European Commission has provided two million Euros of funding to develop and support the coordination of the network. As well as developing a joint research programme, ERA-CAPS will also help researchers to share data and resources across national boundaries, an increasingly important aspect of modern science.

ERA-CAPS was launched at a meeting in London on the 30 and 31 January which was attended by 31 delegates from 20 countries, including representatives from the European Commission and the European Plant Science Organisation. In addition to the 17 European nations, the network will include Canada, India, Israel, Japan, New Zealand and the USA. This will allow many of the best plant science researchers from across the world to collaborate to solve problems in plant biology.

The ERA-CAPS network follows on from the very successful ERA-NET on Plant Genomics (ERA-PG) that ran from 2004-2009. The previous network invested 55M€ in transnational plant genomics research projects as well as producing influential reports and position papers.

Steve Visscher, BBSRC Deputy Chief Executive, said “Plant science research can help us address many global challenges. However the scale of these challenges means that no nation can combat them alone. By working together through this network the scientists of many nations will be able to draw on one another’s strengths, with the synergies enabling more rapid progress and enhancement of the research outputs . The network will also help each nation get better value from its investment in plant science by providing focus, direction and opportunities for sharing.”