

To whom it may concern

My name is Andrew Twidle and I am an early career researcher based at Plant & Food Research (PFR). I would like to take this opportunity provided by the open call from the green paper to express my thoughts on the operation of the current internal funding system operating at PFR and what I would like to see in the future.

The Government directly allocates \$43.2M to PFR annually (see PFR annual report) as non-contestable funding, yet internally there is fierce competition for these funds between scientists (as requested by Government?) where a lot of time is wasted writing bids instead of doing actual science with public money.

My experience

Over the last nine months I have submitted three internal funding applications for this directly allocated money. Each application has required multiple meetings with the potential project team, a literature review, followed by the actual writing of the application. These applications are then reviewed by a panel of internal scientists (from across PFR, some of whom may have little knowledge of the research area proposed) who decide which projects will be funded and for some of the funding pots, whether there is sufficient return on investment back to PFR. Two of the applications I have led failed to be funded while a third is still pending at the time of writing this. These applications have taken many hours to prepare from multiple staff. In the time taken to prepare these applications we could have completed one of these projects, instead we have done nothing but have meetings and fill out forms. Unfortunately, these internal applications seem to be about the process (and evidence of) rather than the science and its subsequent impact for Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). Many publically-funded researcher FTEs are being wasted on this process.

An alternative model

I propose that each researcher is 50% funded by the Government investment that is given directly to each CRI (or whatever % the Government investment money makes up of staff time for that CRI) and that decision making on how best to use those funds are made at a lower level in organisations rather than going through a process initiated by senior members. The science staff in their respective groupings know how to undertake research and what areas are vital for NZ. Further, science staff in these groups have the best knowledge of their researcher's expertise while also having contact with relevant industrial partners, compared to the current system where an internal panel of scientists from across the CRI may have no knowledge around the area of research being proposed. This process would ensure relevant, timely and needed scientific work is undertaken while eliminating the futile internal bidding war and application process currently operating. It also provides stability and continuity to research groups, some of which comprise NZ's capability, unlike the current system where some groups are highly funded by the internal money while other groups have to rely on fluctuating commercial contracts just to stay afloat. This stability will allow long term projects to be undertaken that are not possible under the current structure where most funds only last a few years at the most. It also provides the flexibility to act quickly to problems facing New Zealand rather than having to wait/apply for money.

I hope this review of the current science system sees a reduction in the time spent by scientists writing funding applications for money that CRI's already receive and more time doing actual science.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Andrew Twidle