

Mylnefield Research Services Ltd

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Mylnefield Research Services (MRS) Ltd was established in 1989 as the commercial arm of the Scottish Crop Research Institute (SCRI), to diversify the funding base and to realise the potential of intellectual property (IP) generated at SCRI. The reasons for establishing MRS as a separate legal entity from SCRI are i) to protect the charitable status of the Institute and to take advantage of the gift aid mechanism to maximise financial returns, and ii) to protect the Institute from commercial liability. MRS is a fully-owned subsidiary of SCRI which appoints the Board of Directors of the company. Mr Alastair MacCallum resigned as Chairman of MRS on 29 April 1999 and was replaced by Mr Jim Godfrey.

The Mission Statement of MRS is:

To develop commercially the Scottish Crop Research Institute's scientific expertise, resources and intellectual property, and to improve the quality of services to achieve new standards of excellence.

MRS provides a range of services to SCRI, including providing information on funding opportunities, costing projects, assisting in writing project proposals (especially issues connected to intellectual property and commercialisation plans), project management and managing the Institute's intellectual property portfolio. MRS also has video conferencing facilities and meeting rooms that are available for use by SCRI.

MRS is also responsible for marketing the expertise and resources of the Institute, and in 1999 was Highly Commended for its marketing activities by the Perth and Kinross Chamber of Commerce. In 1999, a company website was launched (www.mrsltd.com) which has attracted interest from all over the world, especially North America and Scandinavia. MRS has produced a broad range of publicity material, which has been widely disseminated. During 1999/2000, the number of commercial companies visiting MRS increased significantly.

Since its incorporation, MRS has been self-sufficient in providing its own accommodation and staffing. This was achieved without start-up funding, Government subsidy or venture capital.

In the financial year 1998/1999, turnover exceeded £1.77 million, of which £1.05 million was transferred to SCRI for services supplied. Income is generated in

four areas, namely contract research, collaborative research, royalties and services.

Contract research income accounts for more than 50% of MRS' income and includes contracts with SmithKline Beecham (blackcurrant breeding), McCains (potato breeding), Biosource Genetics Corporation (viral vector technology) and other major agchem and food processing companies. New contracts were signed in 1999/2000 worth in excess of £1.5 million pounds.

A significant amount of potential business has been lost as a result of the media hostility towards genetically modified food, with a number of companies changing their policy on the application of this technology. It is clear that, in the short- to medium-term, the commercial opportunities for the development of genetically modified crops will be limited, at least in Europe.

MRS is involved in several collaborative research projects, including five Link Schemes and three multi-partner EU projects, usually undertaking project management duties. MRS' contribution to these projects is often not fully-funded and is never profitable. However, MRS' participation is often crucial in ensur-



J.B. Snape (rear) with I. Toth and Beth Hyman, winners of the Altran Foundation Award for Innovation 2000, for their test kit for *E. coli* O157.

ing that valuable contracts are placed at SCRI and that these projects are run professionally and effectively.

MRS is responsible for licensing and protecting plant variety rights throughout the world for cultivars bred at SCRI. Royalty income from these varieties exceeded £154,000 in the financial year 1998/1999, with the strawberry variety Symphony being particularly successful. The brassicas, especially Caledonian Kale and a number of swedes, also performed exceptionally well, although the portfolio of potato varieties again proved very disappointing. During 1999, significant changes to the way in which SCRI potato varieties will be marketed in the future will hopefully lead to a significant increase in royalty income in the next few years. MRS bought back the rights to the blackcurrant variety Ben Alder from PBI Cambridge. Ben Alder is grown in Europe and Canada, and the royalties generated should pay off the investment in less than 2 years.

The lipid analysis unit had another successful year and consolidated its routine analysis business by establishing a serum lipid analysis service. A specialist website (www.lipid.co.uk) for lipid chemists was launched in 1999 and has received highly favourable reviews from both the academic and commercial sectors. Dr Bill Christie, formerly head of the Chemistry Department at SCRI, was appointed as a consultant to the Lipid Analysis Unit in August 1999, and was awarded an MBE in the New Years Honours List in 2000.

Dr Charles Weller, formerly of St Andrews University, was placed at MRS for 3 months in 1999 to work as a technology scout on a pilot project funded by Scottish Enterprise. Other staff joining MRS in this period included Duncan Adam (Lipid Analysis), and 11 scientists who were employed on the Biosource Genetics Corporation project between April 1999 and July 1999. Five members of staff commenced employment on another externally-funded project during November 1999. The following scientists left the employment of MRS in 1999/2000:- Sharon Canavan, Wendy Craig, Bleddyn Hughes, Andrew Mudie, Jonathan Tonberg and Joanne Russell.

MRS supports the training needs of its staff so that it can effectively compete in today's challenging technology transfer market. It hopes to be assessed for Investors in People (IIP) in calendar year 2000.

In August 1999, the Baker Report on technology transfer from UK Government Research Institutes ('Creating Knowledge Creating Wealth' – Realising the Economic Potential of Public Sector Research Establishments) was published. MRS welcomes the findings of the report and looks forward to the proposals being adopted by Government.

Acknowledgements

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