

Research director: Martin Cutts



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**Baffling farm survey
wins gibberish award for
research council**

Plain Language Commission

The Castle
29 Stoneheads, Whaley Bridge
High Peak SK23 7BB, UK

T +44 (0) 1663 733177

E mail@clearest.co.uk W www.clearest.co.uk

F +44 (0) 1663 735135

A baffling survey aimed at farmers has scooped the top prize as the worst example of official gobbledegook in today's Plain Language Commission 2009 Golden Rhubarb Awards.

The document, written by the **Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council**, was nominated for the award by farmer Mike Donovan.

'Should I be able to understand what it means?' he asked. 'The people who wrote this have all received an education; many are professors. Am I the thick one? Or are the authors indulging in a game that involves the use of unintelligible words and phrases?'

The error-strewn document includes words like agri-ecosystems, ontologies, methodologies, instrumentation, elucidation, complementarity, infrastructure, sequestration and non-exclusive models. It starts with a stunning 63-word sentence:

'As part of its Strategic planning with its Institutes BBSRC is intending a significant investment in a farm-based platform for collaborative research at North Wyke underpinning key strategic areas both in food security, especially in sustainable agricultural systems, and in agri-ecosystems services and the effects of the environmental change on agriculture which intersect both the Food security and Living with environmental change programmes.'

The survey then speaks of getting a 'better understanding of processes and underlying mechanisms', 'long term farm platform experimentation' and an 'enhanced national research capability'. Helpfully, it tells farmers that 'The main functional economic unit of activity in food production is the farm.'

Martin Cutts, research director of Plain Language Commission, which specialises in rewriting public documents so that people can understand them, said: 'Busy farmers don't want to plough through words like instrumentation, metadata, over-arching research challenges and informatics. To borrow two phrases from it, not enough 'manure analysis' was done before 'manure application' – nobody seems to have analysed this muck before spreading it about.'

He said: 'Dictionaries define ontology as "the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being" or "a formal, explicit specification of a shared conceptualisation". It's always good to learn a new word, but is this really the place to use it?'

Independent of the UK Government

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Coming a close second in the anti-awards was a booklet from Lord Mandelson's **Department for Business**, the Skills Investment Strategy 2010–11. It says the authors 'plan to pilot whether the mandation of people on Job Seekers allowance to undertake training has an impact on employment outcome', and asserts: 'As we move forward, regional priorities will be articulated within Regional Skills Strategies, based upon regional indicative allocations, which will be fully embedded within a Single Integrated Regional Strategy. This will be signed off by the Secretary of State for BIS and will be a statutory document to drive delivery.'

Cutts, author of the Oxford Guide to Plain English, said: 'It's straight from the style book of Sir Humphrey Appleby, though even he never used "mandation".'

Third place went to a letter from the **Independent Penalty Fares Appeals Service** telling a dissatisfied train passenger that, 'Where there is any outstanding balance to be pursued on the penalty fare notice the debt recovery process will automatically be instigated by agents acting on behalf of the train company in this capacity, once the deadline for our response has been exceeded.'

Cutts said that in everyday English this might say: 'If you haven't paid the full penalty fare by the date we set, the train company's agents will seek to recover the debt from you.'

Cutts added: 'It's not always the authors who are to blame, but the communications professionals and heads of department in these bodies. They should check the stuff and get it written in clear language.'

The awards support national Plain English Day on 8 December.

Ends

Notes for editors

Contacts

- Martin Cutts of Plain Language Commission on 01663 733177 (land) or 07973 390397 (mobile)
- Mike Donovan, Practical Farm Ideas, 07778 877514.

For full documents, please use the following links or email us for copies:

BBSRC's PDF:

http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/organisation/policies/reviews/consultations/0911_north_wyke_farm_platform.html

Department for Business's PDF:

http://www.dius.gov.uk/further_education/funding_and_investment/~/_media/publications/S/Skills-Investment-Strategy

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