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Wageningen University and Research
Executive Board
Tt: Prof. Dr. Ir. Louise Fresco, Prof. Dr. Ir. Arthur Mol, Dr. Tijs Breukink
Droevendaalsesteeg 4
6708 PB Wageningen

Subject: Letter of concern about Dr. Matt Ridley as keynote speaker, opening academic year 2017-2018

Dear members of the executive board of Wageningen University and Research,

We are writing in response to the decision to host Dr. Matt Ridley as keynote speaker for the opening of the WUR 2017-18 academic year. Whilst we welcome the initiative to engage staff and students in debate setting the scene for the year to come, we are concerned and disappointed about the choice of Dr. Ridley as keynote for this purpose.

The concern is based solely around the specific academic platform given to Dr. Ridley as the keynote speaker for the opening of the academic year. The point is therefore not that he is a controversial person as such but that this specific podium makes it seem as though WUR wants to be associated with and give validity to the controversies that surround Dr. Ridley. Most obviously for our university, this concerns Dr. Ridley's arguments on environmental issues including climate change, which are fundamentally questioned and debunked by many world-leading scientists.

Ideally, if Dr. Ridley were to be invited, he should be present as part of an expert scientific panel encompassing a variety of views from the mainstream and beyond. Such a conversation would provide adequate space for interrogating viewpoints and questioning the scientific validity of each claim. We therefore hope that, should you go ahead with Dr. Ridley as keynote speaker, you will do so as part of a broader scientific panel espousing a diversity of views. If this is not accommodated, we fear that the presence of the speaker, rather than unifying this institution around science as the basis for optimism, may well cause greater discord and cynicism among staff and students.

Dr. Matt Ridley's provocative positions are widely discussed in the media and on scientific forums, and as such we do not want to elaborate on these in detail.¹ Key controversies surround his role in government scientific policy advice whilst being an unelected hereditary peer as 5th Viscount in the UK House of Lords; his lobbying in favour of coal and fracking whilst having business links with these sectors; his past at the head of the failed bank Northern Rock, accused by public authorities of irresponsible practice; his belief that climate change is overblown and that increasing atmospheric carbon has benefitted food production and environmental efficiency; that public subsidies to renewable energy should be largely removed.

¹ We would refer interested parties to the independent and award-winning team at Carbon Brief, that asked 11 leading scientists to respond to Dr. Ridley's claims: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/scientists-respond-to-matt-ridleys-climate-change-claims>

DATE

August 25, 2017

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Dr. Ridley claims to be an optimist in difficult times, as this is directly alluded to in the promotional e-mail advertising his invitation as keynote. However, we would dispute the terms upon which optimism is defined here. We question both Dr. Ridley's engagement with the wider scientific evidence, and the contradiction between the provision of reliable public information and the interests of saleable popular science. Offering a platform to such a speaker at Wageningen University, a world leading institution on environmental issues, without an option for rebuttal and debate risks promoting divisiveness and turbulence among academics engaged in very serious global problems.

In sum, we object to this choice as keynote speaker and emphasise that this choice does not represent our interpretation of good science, the seriousness of environmental problems or of 'optimism'.

Yours sincerely,

Bram Büscher
René van der Duim
Maria Koelen
Han Wiskerke
Rik Leemans
Ken Giller
Ewout Frankema
Peter Feindt
Onno Omta
Eric Schranz
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Alexandra Rijke
Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk
Carlijn Wentink
Annemarie Wagemakers
Chizu Sato
Chih-Chen (Trista) Lin

p.s: Even though they did not add their name to the letter for various sound reasons, it is important to mention that a large group of other colleagues, including six professors, also expressed concern about the choice for the speaker. Moreover, we did not include all the names of colleagues from the SDC and RSO groups, many of whom support the letter.