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Leading scientists, politicians welcome Defra gene editing consultation, urge organic sector to keep an open mind

Welcoming the Government's long-awaited consultation on plans to regulate the products of precision breeding techniques in the same way as conventional breeding methods, rather than as GMOs, leading scientists and cross-party politicians have highlighted the potential opportunities of these advances to support more sustainable farming and food production systems.

Julian Sturdy MP, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, whose members first raised the gene editing issue through a proposed amendment to the Agriculture Bill, hailed the Defra consultation as a watershed moment for genetic research and innovation, paving the way to bring our rules into line with other countries around the world.

"Members and stakeholders of our Group have long taken an interest in prospects for gene editing techniques to deliver step-change improvements in the speed and precision of crop and livestock improvement, opening up new opportunities to keep pace with demands for increased agricultural productivity, improved resource-use efficiency, more durable pest and disease resistance, better nutrition and resilience to climate change.

"We share the Government's disagreement with the July 2018 European Court ruling classifying new gene editing techniques as GM, which put us out of step with how these techniques are regulated in other parts of the world, such as Australia, Japan, Argentina, the US and Brazil. The proposals in this consultation will give a much-needed boost to prospects for genetic research and innovation of benefit to farmers here and in less developed parts of the world."

"The recent development of life-saving Covid vaccines in record time has highlighted the enormous opportunities to use advanced genetic science for the benefit of humankind. The same applies to the development of more sustainable ways to secure our future food supplies in the face of population growth, climate change, biodiversity loss and pressure on finite natural resources."

"As we chart our recovery from this devastating health crisis, ensuring our scientists have access to the best available technologies and can conduct their research in a proportionate and enabling regulatory environment is absolutely critical," said Mr Sturdy.

Cross-party members of the Group were also keen to emphasise the potential of these precision breeding techniques to deliver step-change improvements in the productivity and sustainability of all farming systems.

“Organic farmers have as much to gain as conventional farmers, if not more, from the genetic improvement of their crops to make them more disease resistant, more nutritious, more productive and so on,” said cross-bench peer Lord Krebs, a former chair of the Food Standards Agency.

His views were echoed by Lord Rooker, a former Labour Agriculture Minister and also past chair of the Food Standards Agency: “We need better productivity in agriculture and better resistance to disease and climate change. We cannot stand still while our competitors – in the United States, Brazil, Australia, Japan - are able to use gene-editing technologies. Organic farmers have nothing to fear from this. Indeed, they should embrace the science because it could be of great assistance to them.”

Leading scientists also welcomed the plans set out in the Government’s consultation.

Professor Johnathan Napier, Flagship Leader at Rothamsted Research, said: “This consultation sends an important message that the UK’s bioscience sector is open for business, and equipped to meet the many challenges facing agriculture using new technology. Early benefits of gene editing for UK agriculture could include gluten-free wheat, oilseeds with heart-healthy fats, disease-resistant sugar beet and potatoes that are even healthier than those we have now. Gene editing can also help accelerate the improvement of orphan crops like cassava, millet, cowpea and yams, which are critical to food security in less developed parts of the world.”

Dr Tina Barsby, chief executive of crop research organisation NIAB, said: “The proposals set out in this consultation represent potentially the most significant policy breakthrough in plant breeding for more than two decades. Outside the EU, the UK has an early opportunity to embrace a more progressive, science-based approach to genetic innovation, aligning our rules with the rest of the world and putting our scientists, plant breeders, farmers and food producers on a level playing field with their global counterparts.”

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Notes to Editors

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture exists to promote debate among politicians and other stakeholders on the value and role of scientific innovation in UK agriculture. The Group works to ensure that the Government’s support for agri-science is maintained and strengthened, that the regulatory environment is evidence-based and enabling, and that the contribution of modern agriculture to our society, economy and environment is valued and understood as widely as possible.

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