

Genetic Engineering, Agriculture and Brexit: Treachery in Our Midst

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The UK government has launched its [public consultation](#) on the deregulation of gene editing in England. To kick things off, somewhat predictably Environment Secretary George Eustice recently spun a staunch pro-industry line at the Oxford Farming Conference by stating:

“Gene editing has the ability to harness the genetic resources that Mother Nature has provided in order to tackle the challenges of our age. This includes breeding crops that perform better, reducing costs to farmers and impacts on the environment and helping us all adapt to the challenges of climate change.”

In the wake of Brexit, he attacked the EU’s stance on genetic engineering in agriculture by saying:

“Its potential was blocked by a European Court of Justice ruling in 2018, which is flawed and stifling to scientific progress. Now that we have left the EU, we are free to make coherent policy decisions based on science and evidence. That begins with this consultation.”

Eustice’s statements form part of a long-term pro-genetic engineering-deregulation propaganda campaign. It follows on from Boris Johnson’s first speech to parliament as prime minister in 2019 in which he proclaimed:

“Let’s start now to liberate the UK’s extraordinary bioscience sector from anti-genetic modification rules and let’s develop the blight-resistant crops that will feed the world.”

The type of ‘liberation’ Johnson advocates forms part of the usual neoliberal evangelism which this time revolves around the adoption of unassessed genetically engineered crops and food, while overseeing the gutting of food safety and environmental standards, especially in light of a potential post-Brexit trade deal with the US.

It is no secret that various Conservative-led administrations have wanted to break free from the EU regulatory framework on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) for some time. In 2014, [Genewatch exposed](#) collusion between the government and global agribusiness giants to force GMOs into Britain above the heads of a highly sceptical public.

In response to Eustice’s comments, GMWatch stated on its website that deregulation would result in no or few safety checks and probably no labelling for gene-edited products. This is

despite dozens of top scientists having warned that they could be dangerous for human health and the environment in a 2017 [Statement on New Genetic Modification Techniques](#).

Commenting on the government's recent press release sent out to journalists to publicise the consultation process, the Beyond GM campaign group said:

“... the mendacious propaganda material on the benefits of genome editing... which was sent to journalists throughout the country... will be widely taken up as fact, preventing any intelligent public debate during the consultation period.”

The press release is in GMWatch's view “a pack of lies from beginning to end” based on unsubstantiated ‘jam tomorrow’ claims that gene editing has the potential to protect the nation's environment, pollinators and wildlife. These claims ignore the reality that the first gene-edited crop to be commercialised (Cibus's SU canola) is gene edited to survive being sprayed with toxic herbicides. GMWatch argues that there is no gene-edited crop available anywhere in the world that offers environmental benefits.

It is telling that all the claimed advantages of gene-edited crops of the future are already available in the form of agroecological farming methods and high-performing conventionally bred [crops](#). Agroecology offers system-wide solutions that tackle the now well-documented system-wide health, nutrition, social and environmental problems inherent in the model of industrial agriculture supported by corporations behind the genetic engineering project.

However, the UK government shows no interest in these solutions.

GMWatch notes that the government press release claims that gene editing is not genetic modification. The industry has put much effort into spinning this next generation of genetically engineered crops in this way. It wants at all costs to avoid the bad press and negative public perception that has surrounded the first generation of transgenic GMOs by avoiding the GMO tag.

However, gene editing most certainly falls within the definitions of GMOs from technical, scientific and legal (in the EU) standpoints. In fact, the EU and existing UK definition of a GMO does not depend on whether it contains foreign DNA. EU law defines a GMO as an organism in which “the genetic material has been altered in a way that does not occur naturally by mating and/or natural recombination”. Regardless of what the government says, gene-edited organisms fall under this definition.

Moreover, the government is wrong to claim that gene-edited organisms do not contain foreign DNA. This can happen intentionally (in the case of certain types of gene-edited organism) and unintentionally, as a result of the inherent inaccuracy and imprecision of gene-editing procedures. To support this claim, a compilation of peer reviewed evidence has been posted on the GMWatch website in the article '[Science supports need to subject gene-edited plants to strict safety assessments](#)'.

As for the government's claim that gene-edited organisms only contain “changes that could be made more slowly using traditional breeding methods”, GMWatch says:

“We look forward to their proof that the unintended outcomes of gene editing

could happen in traditional breeding. They include large deletions, insertions and rearrangements of DNA, as well as unintended incorporation of foreign DNA and entire genes.”

Long-time campaigner Jim McNulty of the Genetic Engineering Network is scathing in his assessment of how the UK government is currently acting. He says:

“When we look at this administration, filled to the roof with fraud, corruption and cronyism, we now have Boris Johnson trying to make or break the rules on new gene-editing techniques.”

He adds that the Brexiteers in government wasted no time in setting their pro-GMO agenda:

“Within a week of leaving the EU, the UK moved quickly to challenge and compete with our former European partners. The US is refusing to regulate the new genetic engineering techniques, just like they did with the first wave of transgenic GMOs. We in Europe, in the mid-90s, were faced with untested, unstable and unregulated GMOs in soy and maize going into two thirds of EU food products.”

It was a mammoth task to bring politicians, supermarkets and all government bodies on board to regulate the original wave of GMOs.

McNulty explains:

“We succeeded because in the UK, Germany and France campaigners and activists demanded action. The media, retailers and politicians buckled under the massive pressure of public opinion that we created to bring that about.”

The US also felt the pressure:

“Because the EU and its markets were the prize and there was so much anti-GM sentiment, GMOs were driven out and EU lawmakers have never changed their position. Science and public opinion won.”

McNulty argues that we now see treachery in our midst: a former member state has seen fit to bury 25 years of evolving laws and regulations founded on a science-based approach and the precautionary principle.

The consultation will close on Wednesday, 17 March at 23:59 and can be accessed via this [link](#).

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