

A 'Precision Breeding' Bill to Fast-track GMO Deregulation in England

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Global Research, May 16, 2022

[Beyond GM](#) 10 May 2022

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

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The UK government has set out plans for further deregulation of GMOs in today's Queen's Speech.

Prince Charles, who delivered the speech on the Queen's behalf said:

"My Ministers will encourage agricultural and scientific innovation at home. Legislation will unlock the potential of new technologies to promote sustainable and efficient farming and food production."

The new Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill will use the same inaccurate, imprecise and cynical terminology of the recent Statutory Instrument to exempt a hypothetical subclass of GMOs that:

- could have occurred naturally, or;
- could have been created using traditional breeding

According to **Pat Thomas**, a director of Beyond GM

"These new regulatory criteria, which are poorly defined, scientifically unclear and were highly disputed during the passage of the statutory instrument, will likely continue to be disputed as the UK grapples with how best to regulate genetically engineered crops. The government's goal is total deregulation but last year's public consultation showed that 85% of respondents wanted to see gene editing regulated as GMO."

She noted that Defra continues to mislead the media and others about the outcome of the consultation by suggesting there was a high degree of support for deregulation amongst public sector bodies and academic institutions when, in fact, the total number of respondents from these groups represent only a minority (1%) of the responses to the public consultation.

In addition, according to the A Bigger Conversation report [Filling in the Blanks: What Defra Didn't Say - An Alternative Analysis of the UK Government's Consultation on the Regulation of Genetic Technologies](#), numerous key stakeholders and relevant bodies responding to the consultation expressed a large degree of scepticism about Defra's contention that GMOs that "could have occurred naturally or through traditional breeding" could form the basis of scientifically sound regulation.

Science "superpowers"?

According to the government purpose of the proposed Bill is to remove unnecessary barriers inherited from the EU to enable the development and marketing of precision bred plants and animals, which will drive economic growth and position the UK as the leading country in which to invest in agri-food research and innovation.

This, it says, will

- Enable precision breeding technologies to improve the sustainability, resilience, and productivity of agricultural systems. Technologies such as gene editing have the potential to increase disease resistance in crops, which can reduce pesticide use, lower costs to farmers and increase food production.
- Unlock innovation to help us cement our place as a science superpower, and to help meet the ambitions in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

Thomas notes that the two field trials thus far enabled by the Statutory Instrument meet none of those criteria. One, a GMO [camelina](#) (false flax) engineered to have an altered fatty acid profile has been the subject of several trials in the UK already. and the other, A vitamin D-containing [tomato](#) describes tomatoes "grown in pots on the research centre grounds".

"In spite of the government view that we need GMOs to fight pressing ecological crises like climate change, drought and world hunger, neither of these crops addresses these issues. The camelina is intended for farmed fish feed and the nutraceutical industry and the vitamin D tomato also appears to be the subject of pharmaceutical rather than agricultural/environmental interest," said Thomas.

Cynical semantics

The main elements of the Bill, which will extend to England and Wales, but apply to England only are:

- Creating a new, simpler regulatory regime for precision bred plants and animals that have genetic changes that could have arisen through traditional breeding or natural processes. No changes will be made to the regulation of animals until animal welfare is safeguarded.
- Introducing two notification systems for research and marketing purposes where breeders and researchers will need to notify Defra of precision bred organisms. The information collected on precision bred organisms will be published on a public register.
- Establishing a new science-based authorisation process for food and feed products developed using precision bred organisms.

Beyond GM has been calling for a public register of all GMOs used in breeding, but are clear

it should include all GMOs and not just those deemed to be “precision breeding”.

Thomas also questions the use of the phrase “precision breeding” in relation to the government’s plan: “For years the UK government has tried to bury its intentions around deregulation under cynical semantics like sustainable intensification, new breeding technique, speed breeding and precision breeding. It’s all genetic engineering and an equitable public debate depends on transparent and clear language. Government has used this obfuscation to spin a narrative that gene editing is different from genetic engineering when it is just a different type of genetic engineering that brings with it all the same concerns and unresolved conflicts as older style techniques.”

She notes that moves to deregulate GMO food and feed products excludes any citizen engagement, and will be based on narrow scientific criteria devised and implemented by a small group of biased, prejudicial ‘specialists’ who [represent vested interests](#). The process will be inadequate in protecting non-GMO, agroecological and organic businesses and see the UK abandoning crucial safeguards such as labelling, thereby denying citizens the right to choose not to buy or eat genetically engineered food products.

“Given the strong public concerns about genome editing and the fact that much of the science is unsettled and even contested, Beyond GM is calling for more widespread and inclusive debate.” says Thomas “We are also calling for a much broader approach to regulation that goes beyond limited and sterile laboratory science and embraces the social sciences, environmental concerns, food justice and ethics. No substantial change legislation should be made without reference to these considerations.”

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