

Livestock, pets increasingly bred with modified genes

Genetically modified crops are so widespread it's hard to imagine civilization without them.

Genetically modified animals are also more common than most people realize, and we can expect to see even more of these creatures soon — including fine-tuned livestock, designer pets, and even new animals that resemble long-extinct species.

Once we perfect these technologies in animals, the technical barriers to making similar modifications to the human genome will disappear too. Then we'll be left with an even harder question: Where do we stop?

Humans have been changing the genes of creatures for thousands of years. "We've just called it selective breeding," says Mark Westhusin of Texas A&M, an expert in genetically engineering animals.

The newest gene-editing tools are different from breeding in one fundamental and, many would say, positive way. "We're [now changing traits] in a more targeted way — we actually know what we're doing," says Alison Van Eenennaam, an animal genomics and biotech specialist at the University of California at Davis.

Consider the bulldog with its wrinkled face, the dachshund with its long back, and the pug with its curly tail: animals we've created based on our own preferences. We bred those features into creatures but gave them horrible genetic defects along the way. Bulldogs, with their disproportionately large heads, are all born by C-section, while those other two breeds have serious spine troubles because of their characteristic traits.

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis.

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