

China's policy on GMOs may soon get more permissive

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After years of fierce debate in China about whether to allow widespread growing of genetically modified (GM) food crops, a strong signal emerged in 2013 that the leadership wanted to push ahead. It was given in a speech on agricultural policy by President Xi Jinping. . . . He said that guaranteeing China's "food security" was still a serious worry. Hinting at what he saw as a possible remedy, he said China must "occupy the commanding heights of transgenic technology" and not yield that ground to "big foreign firms".

[Twenty years ago] Europeans, . . . had to beg regulators for permission to experiment with a few hundred square metres of GM plants, their Chinese counterparts were conducting trials across tens of thousands of hectares.

Since then, however, Chinese policy had grown much more conservative, for two main reasons. The first is anxiety among some members of the public about the safety of GM foods. The other is a worry that China's food market might become reliant on foreign GM technology. . . .

Concerns about China's growing dependence on food imports . . . may be causing policymakers to rethink. This year's . . . annual statement on agriculture that is released by the leadership in January, said for the first time that China would "carefully promote" GM food crops. On April 13th Liao Xiyuan, an official at the agriculture ministry, said China planned to "push forward" commercial cultivation of GM maize over the next five years.

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China's policymakers may be trying to bring belated order to what is already thought to be the widespread, illegal, growing of GM crops. . . .

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