

Video: Obama on GMOs — ‘Humanity has always engaged in genetic modifications’

In one of his first public appearances since leaving the White House, former President Barack Obama opened up about his views on GMOs and gene-edited food — topics he shied away from during his eight years in office.

After a quick [\\$3.26 million](#) speech at the Seeds & Chips Global Food Innovation Summit in Milan, Italy on May 9, Obama fielded questions from Sam Kass, his former White House chef. Kass said he believes gene-editing is the emerging technology with the biggest potential to transform how we eat by enhancing nutrition, reducing water needs, and more.

“And it’s cheap and easy,” he added, before asking Obama for his thoughts on gene-edited food.

“This debate around genetically modified foods is, I know, a very controversial one,” Obama responded. “The approach that I took when I was President of the United States is in the same way that I would let the science determine my policies around climate change. I try to let the science determine my attitudes about food production and new technologies.”

“The truth is humanity has always engaged in genetic modifications” Obama explained. “The rice we eat or the corn we eat or the wheat we eat does not look like what corn or rice or wheat looked like 1,000 years ago.”

Watch the video below for Obama’s answer at 1:10:56

Obama made clear that the desire to take a cautious approach to these new technologies is understandable, and advocated for smart policies to regulate their use. But he also stressed the importance of not being close-minded and closed off to their potential.

“The GMO debate that took place in the United States as well as here in Europe, I worry a little bit that sometimes the conversation has just gotten cut off, as opposed to, let’s see what the facts are,” he said.

In August 2016, Obama [signed a law](#) that would require all food labels to declare for the first time whether the item contains genetically modified ingredients.

A [review of two decades of research and over 900 studies by the National Academy of Sciences](#) released in May 2016 found no evidence that genetically modified foods pose a hazard to human health. [More than 280 science institutions](#) from around the world have similarly concluded that GM foods pose no safety or health issues, and in some cases provide [environmental benefits](#).

Earlier in the discussion, Obama and Kass discussed agriculture's impact on the environment, and Obama advocated for the need to take into account farmers' interests in environmental policy.

"To the extent that you can show small and medium-sized farmers ways to do things better, that will save them money or at least won't cost them money, they're happy to adopt some of these new processes and new systems," he said. "But if what they see is that you are putting the environmental issues as a priority over their economic interests, then they'll resist."

Could GMOs and gene-edited crops be a win-win for farmers and environmentalists? Obama didn't say, but it seems like this won't be the last we'll hear from the former president on the potential of biotechnology to transform food and agriculture.

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