

## 13 nations say it's time to end 'political posturing' and embrace crop gene editing

**A**gricultural scientists have been excited about gene editing since it debuted several years ago. The technology dramatically cuts the time and expense required to develop crops with desirable traits like disease resistance and enhanced nutrition. And since it doesn't involve moving DNA between species, researchers remain hopeful that gene editing won't trigger a public backlash the way GMOs did in 1996. Officials in the US have set up very few regulatory hurdles for gene-edited crops, arguing that the minute changes mimic what occurs in nature. But questions remain about how other nations will regulate the technology.

Over the summer, the European Union made a controversial political decision to regulate gene editing under GMO protocols that are 17 years old, well before gene editing was even discovered. The decision all but ensured the technology will not be utilized across the EU and has outraged scientists in Europe and even some individual governments. The question soon emerged: How would the rest of the world react to the polar opposite positions established by the EU and the US.

We are now getting some clarity. A coalition of [13 countries](#) announced this week that it would "support policies that enable agricultural innovation, including genome editing." They detailed their policy prescriptions in statement released at a World Trade Organization meeting in Geneva, Switzerland on November 2. Signatories include Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Jordan, Paraguay, the United States, Uruguay, Vietnam and the Secretariat of the Economic Community of West African States.

### Screen Shot at PM

"Precision biotechnology techniques, as a whole, constitute an essential tool for agricultural innovation," [the statement reads](#). "Their use provides farmers with access to products that increase productivity while preserving environmental sustainability." The non-binding statement is an attempt to counter the "misinformation and political posturing" that is creating roadblocks for agricultural gene editing, USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue said.

In July, the [European Court of Justice](#) (CJEU) ruled that gene-edited crops should be regulated as GMOs, which because of Europe's byzantine regulations all but assures that no gene-edited crops could be approved. Researchers use [gene-editing techniques](#) to add or delete genes from an organism's genome. The process usually doesn't involve transferring DNA between species as in classic transgenesis. Plants developed with these new breeding techniques are often called "cisgenic" as a result, and they shouldn't be regulated like GMO crops because they mimic what occurs in nature, experts say.

"Precision biotechnology creates end products that are no different than [those created with] traditional [plant] breeding," University of Florida horticulturalist Kevin Folta told the GLP by email. "There is no reason to regulate them with any more rigor."

The CJEU decision sent shock waves through the scientific community and sparked a [worldwide debate](#) over agricultural gene editing. Many European plant scientists began [closing their labs](#) and leaving the continent in response to the decision, fearing EU regulations would stifle their research. Experts also

worried that Europe's precautionary approach to crop biotechnology would sway officials in the [developing world](#) to reject gene editing, where the technology could help farmers combat plant diseases that can decimate staple crops.

The US has vigorously defended agricultural gene editing in the months following the European court's decision, led by Perdue at the USDA. In August, the [Agriculture Secretary blasted](#) the the CJEU decision as "regressive" and "outdated." The USDA has also approved several gene-edited crops, including a [high-fiber wheat variety](#) anticipated to hit the market within the next two years. The recent North American trade deal, signed in October by Mexico, Canada and the US, similarly included ["science-based" provisions](#) designed to standardize regulation of gene-edited seeds between the three countries.

The new [WTO statement](#) aims to expand this regulatory "harmonization" beyond North America by providing the "necessary guidelines for preventing regulatory asymmetries and, in turn, potential trade disruption." Given Europe's response to gene editing, Perdue [added](#) that "it's gratifying to see .... allies come together under the WTO umbrella to publicly embrace science-based regulatory systems that will allow us to unlock the huge potential of these new technologies."

Folta added that the statement is a huge step in the right direction. "In the age where such decisions are made based on fear and misinformation, it is amazing to see the WTO basing policy on evidence. I'm glad the WTO is siding with science and getting their policy statements correct."

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