

Biotech industry aims to avoid backlash from GMO-wary consumers as CRISPR-edited crops near mass commercialization

The biotechnology industry wants to avoid repeating mistakes with gene editing that it made nearly three decades ago with transgenic crops.

Back when such crops were first being commercialized, the problem wasn't with the technology but with how the industry rolled them out to the public, said Roxi Beck, director of consumer engagement with the Center for Food Integrity.

Biotech companies primarily focused on explaining the benefits to farmers, rather than shoppers who might be leery of plants that incorporate genes from foreign organisms "They didn't know they had to think about the customer's customer's customer."

...

Unlike transgenic biotechnology, gene editing involves removing or changing DNA sequences found naturally in the plant or animal.

It can be used to calibrate messages about gene editing, since consumers "absolutely don't want an academic explanation" but they are also skeptical of oversimplification, Beck said. "We don't want to make it seem as if we were talking down to them."

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For example, saying the process of cutting and altering gene sequences was found to "sound sinister" while comparisons to splicing film or editing text with a word processor were thought to be condescending, she said. "They want that level of transparency."

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