

Anti-biotech groups call for EU-wide ban on disease-fighting gene drives, defying scientists' recommendations

[Editor's note: More than 78 European environmental and agricultural organizations have signed a letter calling for a moratorium on gene drive technology, which scientists say has an important role to play to in preventing the spread of deadly diseases.]

The letter, which was sent on Tuesday (30 June), urges the European Commission to outlaw the release of so-called 'gene drive organisms' (GDOs), calling the technology "incompatible" with the Commission's proposed EU strategy on biodiversity protection. But scientists say the technology holds enormous potential for eradicating some of the world's deadliest diseases.

Synthetic gene drives are a new form of genetic engineering, created via the genetic engineering method CRISPR/CAS9, and are intended to permanently modify or eradicate populations, or even whole species, in the wild.

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The idea of gene drive technology is to force the inheritance of detrimental genetic traits. In this way, scientists hope to reprogram or eradicate species such as disease-carrying insects and invasive species.

This is a key distinction between GDOs and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which are explicitly designed to contain the spread of modified traits.

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The signatory organizations are calling on the EU to back a global moratorium on the release of GDOs at the next Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

The European Parliament called for such a moratorium in a resolution in January this year

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