

## Promoting CRISPR crops at the expense of GMOs is short-sighted when we need both

With an ever-growing CRISPR genome-editing toolbox, scientists are creating crops that can resist diseases and pests, withstand global warming, and offer better nutrition. The emergence of this technology offers a crucial opportunity for renewed public engagement around crop engineering. In order to actualize the potential of CRISPR-edited food, we must work together to create and share strategies for productive dialogue. This article identifies one area of necessary improvement in communication and public engagement.

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Describing how CRISPR-edited crops are arguably more natural than GMOs, or how these crops could potentially use fewer chemicals than their GMO predecessors reinforces pervasive societal suspicions of GMOs. If we think that engineered crops will play a key role in addressing environmental and public health issues, then promoting CRISPR-edited crops at the expense of GMOs is short-sighted. Instead, we must use CRISPR as a new avenue for renewing productive discourse with the public. CRISPR offers a way to bring everyone back to the table, reintroducing voices into vital conversations that will impact us all.

The question, “Is this safe?” captures this tension between distancing CRISPR from GMOs in order to separate a new technology from its polarized relative, while not discarding GMOs and avoiding difficult conversations. Science communicators can use the question “Is this safe?” as a case study to further identify problematic practices and offer strategies for communication alternatives. Before answering this question, we must better understand the consumer’s decision-making process.

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The processes behind engineering a CRISPR-edited crop and a GMO share many commonalities and, in some instances, lead to nearly identical outcomes ....

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In the wake of an incoming wave of CRISPR-edited crops, communicators have an opportunity to renew conversations surrounding what is “natural,” and in doing so, address concerns about “naturalness” and safety. For science communicators, do we suggest that CRISPR-edited crops are more natural? Do we explain how brands with a “natural” label don’t always align with what consumers think they are buying? Or do we zoom out and try to separate “natural” from “safe,” so we don’t tacitly buy into notions that GMOs are all unsafe?

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