‘Stop conflating all biotechnology with genetic engineering’: The case for more refined USDA regulations

Policymakers had known for years that the U.S. regulation of crop biotechnology was out of date, and by 2016, discussions were already underway to revamp the legal texts …. But unfortunately, the United States remains ill-equipped to make decisions about certain classes of emerging crop biotechnologies before they hit the market. If legal definitions of agricultural biotechnology don’t keep up with these advances, we will repeatedly encounter regulatory ambiguity that delays assessment of valuable technology and degrades public trust.

We need to stop conflating all biotechnology with genetic engineering. When policymakers, popular media, and sometimes even scientists use terms like “biotechnology,” “bioengineering,” “genetic engineering,” “gene editing,” and “GMO” interchangeably, it isn’t just frustrating. It is inaccurate. As we have seen, the way “biotechnology” and “genetic engineering” are basically used as synonyms in the U.S. Coordinated Framework overlooks emerging gene expression techniques that do not modify DNA sequence. Many agricultural biotechnologies have absolutely nothing to do with gene sequence or even gene expression, like targeted protein degradation methods that are already in commercial development.

Differentiating between biotechnology techniques in our policy definitions may seem tedious, but it is important for all stakeholders involved.

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