Disease-resistant gene-edited pigs could help revolutionize animal farming. Will consumers accept them?

When Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS), as it became known, was discovered in the early 1990s, it was named, simply, ‘mystery swine disease’. Nobody seemed to know where it came from or how to stop it spreading.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other ‘disruptive’ innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[Genus] PIC has worked with the University of Missouri and Scotland’s Roslin Institute to produce pigs using gene editing that are resistant to PRRS – and could be just a few months away from approval in the US. It is also pursuing approval in other important markets, including, against the odds, the UK, or at least England, where Defra’s Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act has opened the door to this exciting new technology at some point in the future.

But regulatory approval will only be part of the story. PIC knows, particularly following the flawed efforts to introduce genetically modified (GM) crops in Europe, that it needs to win the hearts and minds of the supply chain and consumers if the technology is ever to be allowed to really flourish.

Consumers really liked the idea of ‘better for the animal’ and ‘better for the environment’, but they didn’t want to hear about ‘CRISPR gene edited’,” [PIC’s Banks] Baker said. Once PIC gets FDA approval, it intends to work with celebrity chefs and ‘influencers’ and serve gene-edited pork to consumers to highlight the product and its wider benefits.