China is the world’s top importer of soy and corn. Could dozens of recently-approved GMO varieties help boost production and curb imports?

China has approved dozens of genetically modified corn and soybean seed varieties for planting, in a breakthrough move that could eventually boost production and reduce dependence on foreign supplies.

The country is the world’s top importer of soybeans and corn. Large-scale marketing of GM crops would support the government’s drive for food self-sufficiency and security, a top priority for President Xi Jinping.

A national committee set up by the agriculture ministry has approved 37 GM corn seed and 14 soybean seed varieties, after a preliminary review.

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China started a pilot program for commercial planting of GM corn and soybean crops in 2021 and has expanded the trial to 20 counties in five provinces including major grain producers Hebei and Jilin this year, state media reported, citing an official from the agriculture ministry.

Corn area alone in China is about 44 million hectares, with output of over 288 million tons likely in the 2023-24 year, according to the agriculture ministry. While productivity lags far behind the US, where GM varieties are widely grown, such seeds can increase yields in China by as much as 12%, the ministry said.