Viewpoint: Will ‘irrational fears of mutations and a naive understanding of nature’ derail Europe’s effort to reform 20+ years of misguided crop biotech regulations?

The European Commission has now published a proposal on how, in the future, to regulate crops produced by new breeding technologies. The proposal tries to find a balance between the different interest groups in Europe. On one side, genetically modified plants, which cannot be discerned from their natural counterparts, will exclusively be used for food and feed and are—besides a registration step—not to be regulated at all. On the other side, plants expressing herbicide resistance are to be excluded from this regulation, a concession to the strong environmental associations and NGOs in Europe.

Moreover, edited crops are to be excluded from organic farming to protect the business interests of the strong organic sector in Europe. Nevertheless, if this law passes European parliament and council, unchanged, it will present a big step forward toward establishing a more sustainable European agricultural system. Thus, it might soon be possible to develop and grow crops that are more adapted to global warming and whose cultivation will require lower amounts of pesticides. However, there is still a long way to go until the law is passed. Too often, the storm of arguments raised by the opponents, based on irrational fears of mutations and a naive understanding of nature, has fallen on fruitful ground in Europe.

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A storm of arguments was raised by the opponents after the suggestion had been published. Their line of argumentation is mainly based on irrational fears of mutations and a naive understanding of nature and agriculture. Unfortunately, despite being scientifically questionable, these arguments have all too often fallen upon fruitful ground in Europe.

Finally, the suggested law has to be passed by the European Parliament and the European Council which could result in further changes, along with potential further delays. As the European Parliament will be reelected in June 2024, the suggestion will most likely only enter the legislation process in the autumn of 2024. Nevertheless, with the balanced suggestion of the Commission, the first important step has been made, although it might still take years before we will see the first gene-edited crops being grown in European fields.

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