

Viewpoint: UK's organic farming lobby needs to drop its ideological rejection of gene editing if it hopes to remain viable

In July [2023], the European Commission published its proposals for regulating plants developed using new genomic techniques (NGTs) such as CRISPR gene editing.

This followed a report published by the Commission in April 2021, reviewing the impacts of a July 2018 ruling by the European Court of Justice that all NGT plants should be regulated in the EU as genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The Commission's review determined that the EU's 20-year-old regulatory framework for GMOs was not fit-for-purpose to deal with more recent breeding technologies such as gene editing. It also advised that regulatory reform for NGTs was needed to support EU agriculture's response to urgent climate, food security and environmental challenges.

Central to the EU's deregulatory plan is the re-classification of NGTs into two distinct product groups. Category 1 products, which could have occurred in nature or through conventional breeding, will be exempt from GMO regulations, with no separate requirements for risk assessment, traceability, labelling or co-existence. Category 2 products, incorporating changes which could not have occurred naturally, will continue to be subject to GMO-style risk assessment.

The EU definition of Category 1 products is very similar to the Precision Bred Organisms (PBOs) established by the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act in England, and also mirrors the regulatory classification adopted in other countries, such as Canada, Japan, Argentina and Brazil.

But while the planned regulatory changes may be aligned on both sides of the Channel, the response from the organic lobby could hardly be more at odds.

Here in the UK, a more streamlined and evidence-based approach to regulating these new genetic technologies has met with outcry and outrage from organic bodies such as the Soil Association and Organic Farmers & Growers, whose leaders claim the interests of organic producers will be put at risk without strict labelling and traceability requirements to support zero tolerance of gene editing.

On the Continent, the reaction is much more mixed.

So, for example, Danish organic body Økologisk Landsforening (Organic Denmark), has publicly [questioned](#) the proposed ban on NGTs in organic farming, suggesting that this position should be reviewed with gene editing techniques expected to become widespread in conventional plant breeding.

This is a view [shared](#) by organic dairy farmer Lone Andersen, Vice President of the Danish Agriculture and Food Council, who believes organic farmers need access to innovation, including new genomic techniques, to be sustainable.

Meanwhile Thor Gunnar Kofoed, another leading organic farmer who chairs the seed working group of the European farmers association COPA-COGECA, recently [suggested](#) that, as an organic farmer himself, and in conversation with other organic producers, "they all want to use NGTs", because they know that

being excluded from new varieties used by conventional farmers will make them increasingly uncompetitive.

In Brussels, progress towards the adoption of the Commission's plans has moved surprisingly quickly.

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Following publication of the Commission's draft regulations in July, many Brussels commentators confidently predicted that the proposals would become delayed and bogged down by political opposition in the European Parliament and Council of Ministers, and that more red tape and restrictions would be added.

In fact, last month's [draft report](#) from the European Parliament's Environment Committee, which has lead responsibility for scrutinising the Commission's plans, has proposed an accelerated timeline for MEPs to deal with the file, with the aim of finalising the Parliament's position during the January 2024 plenary session.

Significantly, the Environment Committee report includes proposed amendments which would permit the use of Category 1 NGT plants in organic production, and which would remove the Commission's plans for mandatory labelling of Category 1 NGT seeds, instead focusing on publicly available information, such as variety registers, to support transparency and traceability objectives.

Interestingly, the Estonian government recently [announced](#) that it not only backed the Commission's NGT proposals, but would also support moves to allow gene editing in organic agriculture, noting that in its consultations on the plans: "Estonian organic producers were not opposed to the draft regulation."

These developments in recent months suggest a major split in the EU organic lobby, based on a recognition that gene editing is set to become commonplace in conventional plant breeding, and that it could deliver major benefits to organic producers.

As East Yorks mixed farmer Paul Temple recently [pointed out](#), if the organic lobby maintains its dogmatic opposition to gene editing, "organic growers may be left with older genetics gradually becoming more and more outclassed, more prone to disease and pest infestation, further widening the productivity gap between organic and non-organic."

Here in Britain, I am equally concerned that a growing rift is emerging between the views expressed by those in charge of the organic sector bodies, and the grassroots opinions of many organic producers, for whom gene editing is seen as 'manna from heaven' as a means of closing the yield gap between conventional and organic production.

As a registered organic processor, I do not recall being asked for a view on whether UK organic standards should prohibit the use of these faster, more precise breeding techniques.

How can organic standards seriously endorse the random mutagenesis of entire genomes using chemicals and nuclear radiation, while prohibiting the use of these more targeted approaches?

As pressure builds to permit gene edited crops in EU organic agriculture, Britain's organic farmers risk being left behind if the campaigning stance of UK organic sector bodies does not reflect the views of members on the ground.

Surely it is time for Britain's organic industry to have an open-minded discussion, focused on the potential use of these techniques to align with the objectives of a more productive, resilient and competitive organic sector?

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