Viewpoint: ‘There are still some people out there screaming about gene edited crops, but that opposition is getting weaker’

The amount of money and human resources directed at gene edited crops is staggering, says Kevin Folta, a University of Florida plant scientist.

China, India and other nations are dumping billions into the technology in efforts to improve agricultural productivity and sustainability.

“Colleagues of mine who are over there (China), their labs are flush with cash to do the work. Gene edit strawberries, gene edit apple trees, gene edit everything,” said Folta, who spoke mid-February at CropConnect, a conference hosted by a coalition of commodity groups in Manitoba.

Folta is a well-known advocate of biotechnology and for years was a vocal defender of transgenic crops, pesticides and other technologies in agriculture.

At the meeting in Winnipeg, Folta said the public is likely to accept gene edited crops and the underlying technology because it has beneficial applications for public health.

“There are still some people out there screaming about it, but that opposition is getting weaker,” he said.

Using gene editing to help people with rare diseases shows the public that this is a game changer, Folta said.

“In part because of its medical applications, I think you’ll see a very strong acceptance of these technologies.”

During his talk in Winnipeg, Folta shared a detailed list of gene editing research in agriculture on crops including potatoes, corn, wheat and canola.

Part of the problem is that funding is not keeping up with inflation, said Stuart Smyth, a University of Saskatchewan professor who specializes in agri-food innovation and technology.

“There is less to go around…. Either fewer projects get selected or the same number of projects get funded and projects need to scale back.”
Smyth added that the agriculture industry can no longer rely on the government, so a different approach will be necessary.

“The days of expecting the federal government to fund everything are gone. We need public-private and producer partnerships,” he said. “Everybody is at the table, but I think the federal government needs to signal that movement.”

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