New Zealand considers deregulating crop gene editing, but public resistance and limited understanding of CRISPR limits acceptance

The potential use of genetic technologies in New Zealand’s agriculture has been a political hot potato for 25 years. But the National Party released its ‘Harnessing Biotech Plan’ last year. This proposal indicates the Government would introduce dedicated legislation outlining the use of gene editing and GM, replacing the current Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act.

But the Government’s plan is just a plan, with no indication of when work might begin. The plan (if approved) would streamline approvals for gene-editing technologies that could reduce on-farm emissions and other applications, and approve trials (or use) of gene-edited products that have already been approved by at least two other OECD countries.

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Given past resistance to GM food in New Zealand and sensitivity regarding this subject, some may consider the Government’s new plan a bold move – though others would say it’s long overdue.

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Preliminary surveys by Research First show that 30 percent of the New Zealand public supported growing GM crops in New Zealand. Another 52 percent favoured using gene editing to improve pasture quality on farms. Additionally, 84 percent of New Zealanders felt uninformed about gene-editing technologies, and 43 percent were neutral or didn’t know if these technologies were important for New Zealand’s future.

Clearly New Zealand needs to discuss this matter, as called for by Te Aparangi Royal Society in 2019 and the New Zealand Productivity Commission in 2021.

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