

# Promoting Seed Innovation

Information from the British Society of Plant Breeders

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## GOVERNMENT ACTION NEEDED ON OILSEED RAPE

After yet another bad year for oilseed rape (OSR), there seems to be a willingness across the agricultural organisations to push for government action to ensure it is a viable crop for farmers to grow, and that our domestic crushing capacity is protected. Most of all, we have a great climate for growing a valuable flowering crop like OSR, and consumers want UK grown rapeseed and vegetable oils. Supporting this should be a priority for the newly created role of 'Minister for Food Security'. The BSPB is involved in making the case for this support, and has been highlighting some of the measures that could be taken to help with this, just three of which we outline below.



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The first is to make the import and export of oilseed rape seed (and a range of other crops including linseed and many vegetables) for research and breeding work much more straightforward. Additional border requirements this year have only added further cost and complication to UK OSR breeding programmes, and came close to jeopardising the official trials of new varieties this summer. Some breeders are operating UK specific breeding programmes for oilseed rape, whilst others are also working with international partners to develop new and better varieties. Recent border rules brought in during April shouldn't get in the way of either of these, or other innovative breeding work designed to get better varieties to you as quickly as possible.

The second relates to the need to ensure new and innovative chemistry and effective biologicals come to the UK market through enabling regulation. With the traditional chemistry that protected the crop for so long off the table, new solutions are urgently needed. The best way to maximise the investment which goes into breeding and research work is to have a viable OSR crop grown in the UK which makes that attractive. In turn, that is best achieved with a good IPM toolkit of options to suit the conditions and risk levels you face on farm.

A third area for the new Government to help improve the prospects for OSR is though supporting it within SFI and wider agricultural policy, but this newsletter is being written before the budget, and we all know there are many competing demands on that at the moment. Genuine improvement probably only comes with a range of government policy changes that we will continue to call for. Worries about the future of OSR are far from new, but there is still time to support the crop, and promote seed innovation, but it needs action now.

## PRECISION BREEDING

### Government to proceed with necessary secondary legislation.

The recent announcement from Food Security Minister Daniel Zeichner that the Government will bring forward the necessary secondary legislation to allow precision breeding to become a reality in England is very welcome. The last government had passed the primary legislation, and planned to introduce the secondary legislation in the summer, but the election was called before it did so.

The BSPB has long supported this move to create a framework for using precision breeding because it has the potential to reduce the time it takes to develop better varieties, and expand the potential that plant breeding offers to farmers and growers. At shows and grower meetings we attend, the vast majority of farmers and growers we meet support this move, but we also know some of you have questions and concerns. It's worth remembering that the precision breeding technology is largely based on adding, removing, or changing the characteristics of plants which could be achieved through conventional breeding, but doing so more precisely and quickly. There are many examples we could use, and we will be covering more of this on our website when we see the detail of the secondary legislation.

Many of you will have seen varieties developed to tackle specific pest and disease challenges, but doing so with traditional methods also often come with a downside, at least at first. This is essentially because it's impossible to breed conventionally for just a single desirable characteristic. If you cross two or more varieties, you mix all sorts of characteristics, and this could mean, for example, a tolerance of a certain disease also comes with a yield penalty – which breeders then have to spend years trying to breed out. Precision breeding has many advantages, but just one is the potential to move resistance and tolerance to some pests and diseases without all the unintended characteristics which are also moved in conventional cross-breeding.

As we face increasing and more quickly emerging challenges to growing crops, we also need to ensure we all benefit from faster, better, innovative breeding techniques. Many other countries have moved, or are moving in this direction, and the EU also seems to be slowly changing its position on it.



## ORGANIC SEED

### New rules which would have hit imports have been postponed.

The BSPB is also pleased the Government has delayed implementing new rules on the movement of organic seed which were due to come into effect in February 2025. The BSPB and several other organisations have been highlighting to officials just how impractical the change would have been as breeders and importers would need onerous 'certificates of inspection' with each consignment.

If they had gone ahead, it would have significantly affected the supply of some organic seed next year. It's been pushed back to 2027, so it hasn't gone away, but there is now time to resolve the problems with the proposals.

## BSPB FAQ UPDATES

With all the changes brought in as a result of SFI, we've been updating our farm saved seed FAQs, a copy of which is enclosed, but feel free to get in touch if you have any questions.