

# Promoting Seed Innovation

Newsletter from the British Society of Plant Breeders

SPRING 2025

## CHANGES IN FARMING POLICY

These newsletters usually focus on issues affecting seed and seed innovation, and an awful lot has happened in farming policy since the last edition in Autumn 2024, much of which has the potential to directly and indirectly affect the seed sector. However, one positive thing has been the weather this spring. It's always dangerous to reference this – it's certain to be out of date by the time it reaches you, but at the time of writing, spring drilling conditions have been much nicer than the last couple of years. That said, the weather is just turning slightly, and after several weeks of dry weather but cold nights for much of the country, *a bit* of rain is likely to be welcome.



■ Anthony Hopkins  
Head of Policy

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It's hard to know where to start with all of the policy changes and challenges farming is facing, and this section is just a whistle stop look at some of the key developments. The sudden closure of SFI to new applications will have been a blow to many of you thinking about applying or working on applications. It's also proven frustrating for the seed and breeding sectors who've been working to develop and secure seed supply several years into the future. Once again, it seems the long-term nature of planning that all sectors of agriculture have to do has not been considered when decisions have been taken. As Defra develop a 'reformed SFI' to be announced after the Spending Review this Autumn, we'll be urging them to think about this more than it seems they have before.

Defra have also published the long-awaited National Action Plan (NAP) on the Sustainable use of Pesticides, several years late, and with less detail than we might have liked on some key topics. Seed is hardly mentioned in the document, even though the already extended access to EU approved seed treatments, which are crucial for crops like maize and some vegetables expires in 2027. To the breeding sector, seed treatments are a technology which goes beyond the protection products they may contain, but this seems to be overlooked by regulators and politicians primarily concerned about the prophylactic nature of some of them. In reality, the NAP just shows how much work is still to be done on a range of PPP issues that are still outstanding nine years after the vote to leave the EU.

The BSPB and other farming and supply chain organisations have also continued to make the case for Government to support the UK oilseed rape crop, whether that's via the reformed SFI, improving the ability to import and export seed, or with access to viable crop protection. There's also wider work underway to

improve the advice and guidance available for those who are still trying to grow it. For breeders to be working on developing better varieties of OSR, we must have a viable crop in the UK to justify it.

On all of these issues, and the many others your businesses are facing, the BSPB message to Defra has been that we all need long-term confidence to invest in the future of farming, and if that's undermined, we won't be able to deliver some of the things the Government says it wants. Whether that's confidence to pursue broadacre breeding programmes for crops like OSR, securing the supply of seed for environmental schemes, or investing in precision breeding technology.

## PRECISION BREEDING

**We often mention precision breeding (PB) in these newsletters, but this significant potential source of seed innovation is now coming closer to reality in England.**

The primary legislation was passed in 2023, but the election last year delayed the secondary legislation which is required to use the technology and market the seed commercially. The Government introduced the secondary legislation during March this year, it cleared a hurdle in the Commons at the end of the month, and it will now move to the Lords after Easter. Unless someone throws a spanner in the Parliamentary works, it should mean that before the end of the year we'll have a Defra process to approve precision bred plants, a Food Standards Agency process to ensure they are safe, and a Defra process to list and market PB varieties. The latter of these processes is likely to be very similar to the processes conventional seed have been going through for decades to ensure a variety is 'distinct, uniform, and stable' and that agricultural crops have 'value for cultivation'.

All this means that on the current timelines, the first precision bred varieties are likely to start seeking the necessary approvals toward the end of this year. However, the first applications will probably come from sectors like soft-fruit, and other high-value crops with relatively 'straightforward' supply chains. As most of you reading this will be

primarily interested in arable crops, they will follow and plenty of research and development is under way. Something which often seems to be overlooked is how precision breeding will complement, not replace, the range of long-established breeding methods. If we think of crossing two varieties of wheat to move a trait from one to the other in a traditional way, it has proven very successful in delivering genetic improvements. However, the outcome of each well-planned cross will be uncertain, bring numerous unintended changes, and often doesn't work. With precision breeding, identifiable traits can be moved from one variety of the same species to another more precisely, and more quickly. It will still take time to assess, test, and multiply promising plants, but the reduced time it takes to develop new varieties, and increased precision it brings is going to be needed with the food security challenges the world faces.

All precision bred plants will be easily identifiable because they'll have to be separately listed on a statutory register of PB varieties, and there will be a simple BSPB list growers can reference against when making buying and planting decisions.



## BSPB AT CEREALS 2025

As usual, the BSPB will have a stand at Cereals, and looks forward to seeing many of you – come and find us on stand 718.