

# Promoting Seed Innovation

Newsletter from the British Society of Plant Breeders

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## PLANT BREEDING IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

A great deal has happened since the last of these Promoting Seed Innovation newsletters. Despite a very grey and wet start to the year for most, many crops are looking good, but the global situation UK agriculture faces has become increasingly challenging. At the time this newsletter is being written (in early April) the outcome of the conflict in the Middle East remains unclear, but plant breeders share the concerns of the farming sector about the impact on the increased cost of production and potential cropping plans for this spring, and especially this autumn. Domestic food security should always be a priority, but even more so as the world becomes more uncertain. Access to the latest and best crop varieties and to key inputs is essential to that.



■ Anthony Hopkins  
Head of Policy

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With concerns about energy shocks, and the cost and availability of inputs at the forefront of everyone's mind, some of the longer-term policy issues can seem a bit distant. However, there are some important areas we need the Government to get right over the coming months to protect and encourage plant breeding innovation. Top of that list is 'EU Reset' which remains both the key potential opportunity, and challenge to promoting seed innovation in the UK. As we have covered in previous editions, over the last six years, the movement of seeds between the UK and EU has often been difficult and expensive, especially for crops like pulses, oilseed rape, and linseed which are subject to more regulations on their movement than cereals.

Whatever your views on Brexit, the plant breeding sector is truly international. Whether that is the global sharing of genetics, sending breeding material abroad to benefit from longer or different seasons for multiplication, importing seeds we can't reliably produce here like maize, or testing varieties for suitability in other locations. The imposition of barriers, delays, and costs to that movement disadvantages UK breeders and growers. If the UK Government and EU can agree to remove some or all of these and do so in a way which does not disadvantage either side, it should be good for UK competitiveness and resilience.

Of course, that is a big 'if' but the UK Government seems determined to pursue improved relations with the EU, and that will only come with increasing 'alignment' with EU regulations, which means it is important they get things right. So far, we only know the basic outline of what they would like to achieve, but both sides hope for a wide-ranging agreement. As other organisations such as CropLife have highlighted, there are considerable risks if a bad deal is struck, especially if there are regulatory changes growers and plant breeders have to adapt to with little notice or without a suitable transition period.

Removing the barriers, delays, costs, and duplication will help, but that is only part of the picture given that we will remain outside the EU. To make the most of UK-EU Reset, the Government should also be working on domestic policies which encourage innovation here, and which make the UK an attractive and competitive place for plant breeding to deliver the more sustainable and resilient varieties the Government want to see and growers need. One additional aspect of a reset in relations between the UK and EU should be a return to much easier and faster access to seed from EU member states, if the market, weather, or the climate necessitates it. At the moment, varieties need to be separately registered in the UK to be planted here, which is time consuming and has reduced the options for accessing potentially suitable EU seed quickly when a need or business opportunity arises.

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## Precision Breeding Update

**In recent months we have had quite a few questions about precision breeding, and what has happened since the legislation allowing the technology came into force in England during November last year.**

In the short-term, EU Reset is likely to complicate the progress that has been made on precision breeding because it will be affected by the wider trade and regulatory negotiations taking place. However, in recent months the EU has also been making progress towards allowing precision breeding, potentially as soon as 2028. The BSPB has been making the case for this to be an ideal policy area for the Government to be advocating in the negotiations for England to lead the way, and this would also incentivise domestic investment.

Ultimately, this highlights one of the trade-offs which EU reset entails. An agreement to remove trade barriers, duplication, delays, and costs will inevitably require alignment of regulations and lead to a reduced scope for differentiation. Arguably, this is less contentious for plant breeding and seed than some other sectors, because of the level of pan-European and international integration, but agriculture needs the Government to ensure the UK is not disadvantaged in the negotiations and eventual agreement.

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## EU Reset and the Future

One consideration which often seems to be overlooked because of the focus on removing the current barriers and costs of trade with the EU is what happens after any agreement is reached. EU policy will continue to develop, and the UK is likely to have to align with that developing policy in those areas covered by any agreement and it is not clear how much scope there will be for the UK to influence things as a 'third country'. Things are likely to develop quickly in the coming months. If the improved relations are to be taking effect during mid-2027 as the UK Government hopes, we should know much more by the time of the next of these newsletters in the Autumn.

