

BSPB urges Ministers to maintain UK lead on precision breeding

Following the publication this week of the EU Commission's proposals for regulating the products of New Genomic Techniques (NGTs) in the European Union, the British Society of Plant Breeders (BSPB) has urged the UK Government to ensure Britain retains its leading edge over the rest of Europe in promoting research, investment and innovation in these technologies.

The EU proposals create two distinct pathways for NGT plants to be placed on the market. NGT plants that could occur naturally or through conventional breeding (similar to the definition of a Precision Bred Organism under the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 in England), would essentially be regulated in the same way as conventional plants and seeds, with no separate statutory requirement for risk assessment, food and feed marketing authorisation, traceability, food labelling or coexistence arrangements. Other NGT plants would be subject to the EU's existing GMO regulations.

The EU approach is based on a [scientific opinion](#) adopted by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in November 2020 which confirmed that *“genome editing techniques that modify the DNA of plants do not pose more hazards than conventional breeding.”*

Turning to the situation at home, BSPB chief executive Sam Brooke noted that simplified field trial arrangements introduced in March last year had led to an increase in research activity, with eight new field trials of precision bred crops notified in England under the new arrangements, twice as many as the entire EU-27 over the same period. As NIAB chief executive Professor Mario Caccamo also recently [observed](#), the applications involved cover a range of crops and traits, all focused on using new precision breeding techniques to make our farming and food production systems healthier, safer, and more sustainable.

“As these field trials demonstrate, precision breeding techniques open up the potential for plant scientists, breeders and farmers to keep pace with demands for increased agricultural productivity and resource-use efficiency, healthier food, reduced chemical use, and resilience to climate change. But they need a clear route to market to realise those benefits in practice.”

“Through the Precision Breeding Act, the UK Government led the way in diverging from outdated EU rules classifying gene edited products in the same way as GMOs. But the detail of how the Act's provisions will be implemented is not yet finalised, particularly in relation to food and feed marketing. Based on the Commission's proposals, there is a real risk that the EU could be on course to eclipse our lead, by regulating NGT products – where they could have occurred naturally or through conventional breeding – in the same way as conventionally bred varieties. Here in England, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) still appears on course to establish an entirely separate regulatory process for precision bred food and feed products, potentially involving expert committee scrutiny, risk assessment, public consultation, Parliamentary approval and Secretary of State sign-off. That could significantly drive up the red tape, time and costs involved in bringing new precision bred crops to market.”

“Outside the EU, BSPB members are operating in a much smaller market-place than our European counterparts. We have a world-leading plant science base, and a highly efficient plant breeding and seeds sector, but for investment and innovation to take place here, our regulations need to be even more agile, responsive and enabling than in the EU, and certainly not more restrictive. BSPB urges UK Ministers, and the Food Standards Agency in particular, to ensure implementing arrangements for the Precision Breeding Act are as streamlined as possible, and reflect the overwhelming scientific evidence that precision bred products are at least as safe as their conventionally bred counterparts.”

“Echoing Professor Caccamo, it would be a travesty if the EU, from whose restrictive rules we originally sought to diverge, turned out to have more enabling and science-based rules than our own,” concluded Ms Brooke.



Caption: BSPB CEO Samantha Brooke

About BSPB

The British Society of Plant Breeders (BSPB) is the representative body for the UK plant breeding industry. Acting on members' behalf, BSPB licenses, collects, and distributes certified seed royalties and farm-saved seed payments on agricultural and horticultural crops. The Society represents members' interests on technical, regulatory, and intellectual property matters, and works to promote continued innovation and investment in UK plant breeding.

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