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Government announces Autumn consultation on future regulation of precision breeding techniques

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Science and Technology in Agriculture has welcomed a commitment from Defra Minister Lord Gardiner of Kimble that the Government will launch a public consultation in the Autumn on post-Brexit regulation of precision breeding techniques such as gene editing.

Responding to an amendment led by the APPG during yesterday's Committee Stage debate on the Agriculture Bill, Lord Gardiner acknowledged the very strong case for taking simple gene editing techniques out of the scope of GM regulation, and he thanked Lord Cameron of Dillington, a vice-chair of the APPG and current chair of the advisory board of the Government's Global Food Security programme, for raising the issue.

Announcing the consultation, Lord Gardiner reiterated the Government's longstanding objection to the 'unscientific' European Court ruling of July 2018 classifying gene editing techniques as GM, highlighting the urgent need for a more scientific approach to regulation to reap the economic and environmental benefits of these technologies, and re-confirming the Government's view that gene edited products whose DNA changes could have occurred naturally or through traditional breeding techniques should not be regulated as GMOs.

"In 2018, the European Court of Justice ruled very clearly that these products must be treated in the same way as GMOs, even if the changes to their genetic material could have been produced by traditional methods, such as crossing varieties of the same species and selecting only the improved individuals. The UK Government intervened in the case to argue for a more scientific outcome. Our position was, and is still, that if the products of gene editing could have been produced naturally or by using traditional breeding methods, they should not be regulated as GMOs," said Lord Gardiner.

"The Government are committed to taking a more scientific approach to regulation. Many scientific institutes, along with the breeding industry and some EU member states, such as Sweden, share our view that the current rules are unscientific and a solution is needed soon if we are to reap the economic and environmental benefits these technologies have to offer, such as more resilient crop varieties, reduced use of synthetic pesticides and more disease-resistant animals."

"It is important that the Government address this matter, both by making any necessary legislative changes and by ensuring public confidence and trust. It is important that these issues are heard and addressed transparently. To this end, I place on record that the Government will consult publicly on this issue. Defra is working on the details so that a consultation can be launched in the autumn," he said.

Welcoming the Government's commitment to consult on future legislative changes to set aside the July 2018 ruling, Lord Cameron highlighted the enormous potential benefits on

offer for the advancement of agricultural research and the prospects for farmers and the environment both at home and overseas:

“Greater access to these techniques will allow future developments to be driven by a wider range of research organisations, mostly led by small businesses and public research organisations, not just large multinationals. It will allow some of the world’s best agricultural research stations, which we have in this country, to team up with smaller research stations in developing countries, which have special crops, often with special local problems. By working with these poorer countries, as well as with UK agriculture, we can help farmers everywhere produce the food that their local population requires.”

“It would also bring our rules into line with most other countries, apart from the EU, where precise improvements are made within the same species—improvements that could have occurred naturally or through traditional breeding methods. As we emerge from this Covid disaster, it is vital that our scientists are able to employ the precision and speed needed to improve our agriculture and environment with safety. I am therefore grateful that the Government has so readily accepted the case for moving away from the EU’s unscientific rules in this area, and has committed to taking early action by consulting on the issue in the Autumn. We look forward to participating in that consultation,” said Lord Cameron.

The APPG-led amendment was supported by many influential Peers across the House.

Lord Krebs, an eminent zoologist and former chairman of the Food Standards Agency, said: “The amendment we are debating would enable the Government to start a public consultation on harnessing the potential of the brilliant UK plant science research community to make our agriculture greener, more productive and more sustainable.”

Baroness Hayman, a former Labour Agriculture Minister and Lord Speaker in the House of Lords, and current co-chair of Peers for the Planet, said: “I argue that it is our responsibility to provide the appropriate regulatory framework for these advances, after what has been widely seen as the flawed ECJ judgment of 2018. We do not have to create something de novo, because we have regulatory frameworks in place for assessing varieties that are bred conventionally to have new qualities, but which, with gene editing, would simply be produced quicker and with more precision.”

Lord Rooker, a former Labour Agriculture Minister and past chairman of the Food Standards Agency said: “We need better productivity in agriculture and better resistance to disease and climate change. We cannot stand still while our competitors—the United States, Brazil, Australia, Japan—are able to use gene-editing technologies. It does not make sense.”

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Notes to Editors

A full transcript of the Committee Stage debate in the House of Lords on 28 July is available [here](#), beginning at column 204.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture exists to promote debate among politicians and other stakeholders on the value and role of scientific innovation in UK agriculture. The Group works to ensure that the Government’s support for agri-science is maintained and strengthened, that the regulatory environment is evidence-based and enabling, and that the contribution of modern agriculture to our society, economy and environment is valued and understood as widely as possible.

Julian Sturdy MP, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, wrote to Defra Secretary Rt Hon George Eustice MP on 7 May 2020 calling on the Government to support a targeted amendment to the Agriculture Bill, paving the way for the Secretary of State to consult on the necessary legislative changes to set aside restrictive EU rules on precision breeding techniques and bring our domestic regulations into line with the regulatory stance of other countries around the world, such as the US, Argentina, Brazil, Australia and Japan.

A copy of the text of the letter is available [here](#)

A statement by the APPG is available [here](#)

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