



***Text of letter sent by email from Julian Sturdy MP to Rt Hon George Eustice MP, Defra Secretary of State –7 May 2020***

Dear George

As chair of the APPG on Science and Technology in Agriculture, and on behalf of a broad cross-section of UK research, plant breeding, farming and seed supply sectors, I am writing to seek your urgent support for a targeted amendment to the Agriculture Bill, paving the way for the UK to adopt a regulatory definition of GMO compatible with the internationally recognised Cartagena Protocol, and thereby exempt simple gene editing applications from the scope of GM regulation.

As you know, the All-Party Group has taken a keen interest in prospects for advanced gene editing techniques to deliver step-change improvements in the speed and precision of crop and livestock improvement, opening up significant opportunities to keep pace with demands for increased agricultural productivity, resource-use efficiency, more durable pest and disease resistance, improved nutrition and resilience to climate change.

We share the UK Government's fundamental disagreement with the July 2018 CJEU ruling classifying newer forms of mutagenesis as GMOs. The EU position is out of step with how these techniques are regulated in other parts of the world, such as the US, Argentina, Brazil, Australia and Japan. It is also at odds with the independent expert advice provided to the UK Government by ACRE.

We welcome Defra Ministers' clear statements that this should be an early candidate for regulatory divergence post-Brexit, and fully support the Government's view that gene-edited organisms should not be subjected to GM regulation if the DNA changes could have occurred naturally or through traditional breeding methods.

Leaving the EU presents an opportunity for the UK to re-align itself with the science-based regulatory stance of other countries around the world, sending a clear signal that the UK is serious about supporting genetic research and innovation.

There is a relatively straightforward regulatory solution for this, which would be to exchange the current EU definition of GMO in the UK Environmental Protection Act for a definition compatible with the internationally recognised Cartagena Protocol – to which the UK is a signatory. This would re-focus GM regulation on the insertion of viable, heritable, foreign DNA, and would at a stroke remove around 90% of gene editing applications from the scope of GM regulation.

Recognising that primary legislation is required to effect this change, the Agriculture Bill currently going through Parliament provides a timely opportunity to include a targeted, Government-backed amendment conferring new Ministerial powers to consult on and, if appropriate, to effect this change. Indeed, the Health & Harmony White Paper preceding the Agriculture Bill specifically referred to the need for farmers to have access to the very latest technology, indicating support for more commercial research to improve plant breeding techniques, and the need for new approaches, including in plant biotechnology.

Furthermore, as you will be only too keenly aware, Defra is unlikely to be first in line for new primary legislation once the Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment Bills have run their course, and this opportunity may not arise again for some considerable time.



## All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

In short, we have a unique opportunity, through the Agriculture Bill, to put in place enabling arrangements which will give force to the changes Defra Ministers have repeatedly indicated they wish to see, and which will mark an important first step, in the words of our Prime Minister, to liberating the UK's extraordinary bioscience sector.

These steps will provide an important signal that as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis we will use the best available science to address critical challenges of climate, food security and nutrition, global inequality and sustainability while at the same time supporting the rural economy and strengthening the UK's position as a global hub for investment and research.

I look forward to discussing how we can take this forward.

With best wishes

Julian Sturdy MP  
Chair  
APPG Science & Technology in Agriculture