



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

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Embracing gene editing can help organic growers reduce pesticide use, says Peer

A leading Conservative Peer has issued a challenge to the organic sector to come clean about their use of toxic pesticides to control pests and diseases, urging them to keep an open mind on the potential of new precision breeding techniques to help reduce the use of chemical inputs.

Writing in [Farmers Guardian](#), Viscount Ridley – a member of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee – said the Government was right to grant a temporary and limited derogation for the use of neonicotinoid seed treatments on sugar beet seed after the crop's devastation by virus yellows infestation in 2020.

But he attacked the hypocrisy of the organic and anti-pesticide lobby for opposing the decision, noting that they conveniently overlooked a similar emergency derogation granted in 2020 to spray copper hydroxide as a blight fungicide on organically grown potatoes, a decision advised against by the Expert Committee on Pesticides due to environmental concerns over acute aquatic toxicity.

“Unless we are prepared to let our food crops rot in the fields, or to become vectors for harmful and potentially lethal mycotoxins spread by insect pests and crop infections, then we must enable technologies which control these pests and diseases. The same risk of infestation applies whether crops are grown conventionally or organically,” he observed.

Highlighting the potential for innovative breeding technologies such as gene editing to accelerate the development of crop varieties with better and more durable pest and disease resistance, such as virus yellows resistance in sugar beet or late blight resistance in potatoes, Viscount Ridley pointed to the Government's public consultation on genetic technologies, due to report shortly, as an opportunity to embrace these game-changing technologies and “resume our role as a world leader in innovation.”

“I suspect many consumers would be concerned to learn that certified organic potatoes on sale in our supermarkets had been treated with a banned fungicide classed as toxic to aquatic life. Like others before me I would therefore urge the organic lobby to keep an open mind on the potential of these precision breeding techniques to enable more environmentally friendly farming and food production in the future,” he concluded.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

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.

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