

To: Daniel Zeichner MP, Minister of State for Food Security and Rural Affairs, Defra

13 May 2025

By email

Dear Daniel

On behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, I am writing to congratulate you and your team at Defra on the smooth and successful passage through both Houses of Parliament of the secondary legislation needed to implement the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 for plants in England.

This is truly a landmark moment for genetic innovation in agriculture, the first time in decades that new legislation has been passed in this country which seeks to enable and encourage the use of new genetic technologies, rather than stifle them with extra layers of regulation and bureaucracy.

As you will know, this All-Party Group first called for regulatory divergence from EU rules on gene editing during the passage of the Agriculture Act in 2020. It is particularly fitting that our four members who led those calls – Lord Cameron of Dillington, Lord Rooker, Baroness Hayman and Lord Krebs – also took part in last Tuesday night's debate in the House of Lords.

Making these tools more readily available to scientists and plant breeders will accelerate the development of higher-yielding crops with greater climate resilience, more durable disease resistance, reduced environmental impact, and with improved end-use quality and nutritional properties.

Scientific leadership in precision breeding will also open up global trade and investment opportunities for the UK, as we align our rules with other major economies around the world, including Canada, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Japan and the USA.

England is now ahead of every other European country in adopting more progressive regulations, and we have an opportunity to capitalise on that advantage by promoting early adoption and application of these technologies as a core part of the Government's Industrial Strategy and Green Growth mission.

However, on behalf of the All-Party Group, I must seek your reassurance that this hard-won advantage over the EU will not be delayed or diluted by a prospective new Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement currently under negotiation between the UK and EU.

According to recent reports, an SPS deal could mean the UK Government agreeing to 'dynamic alignment' with the EU's food safety rules in return for easier trading arrangements with the bloc. Although proposed new EU rules on gene editing are currently under discussion, we do not yet know what the outcome of those deliberations will be, and the products of precision breeding techniques such as gene editing are presently regulated as GMOs in the European Union.

It seems unthinkable that the UK Government would take the Precision Breeding Act's implementing regulations all the way through both Houses of Parliament, as well as preparing the associated detailed technical guidance for applicants from both Defra and the Food Standards Agency, without having the confidence up front that the legislation would be exempt from the terms of a future SPS deal with the EU.

When pressed on this issue in last Tuesday's debate, however, Defra Minister Baroness Hayman of Ullock offered no response, but she did point to recent progress in the European Council on the EU's draft New Genomic Techniques (NGT) proposal, noting that "it is quite similar in aim to the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023".

There is understandable nervousness among researchers and prospective investors at the UK Government's apparent reluctance to provide clarity on this issue. If the outcome of a new SPS deal means that England's precision breeding rules must be scrapped or put on hold until we align with the EU, there is a serious risk that investment would simply flow across the Channel, and our hard-won advantage would be lost.

A reset deal may lead to a short-term boost in trade, but if it also makes the UK a less attractive place to invest, it may put at risk longer-term prospects for innovation-led growth.

Developing closer collaboration and partnership with the EU is welcome, particularly in relation to science and innovation. I am delighted that British researchers and innovators are celebrating a major milestone after securing nearly £500 million in research grants from the EU's Horizon Europe programme - marking a strong return after a three-year post-Brexit hiatus.

But in a rush to align more closely with the EU, we must not cede our regulatory autonomy in key areas of agri-innovation such as precision breeding, and with it compromise our ability to be part of a new world order of trading and investment opportunities beyond Europe.

Can I seek your assurance on that point?

Also, on behalf of the All-Party Group, I must reiterate our call on the UK Government to act without delay in bringing forward parallel implementing rules for precision breeding in farmed animals under the Precision Breeding Act.

Last week, the eminent veterinarian Professor the Lord Trees, a vice chair of this All-Party Group, pointed to the most serious warning yet from virologists at the Global Virus Network that the rising threat from the rapidly spreading and mutating H5N1 bird flu virus poses an increased risk of human-to-human transmission.

Lord Trees highlighted UK-based research led by scientists at Imperial College in London and the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh as a potential solution to breaking the cycle of H5N1 transmission by using gene editing techniques to develop bird flu resistant chickens. Eighteen months ago, the team reported promising results for breeding birds with effective resistance to H5N1. The researchers estimate that within two years this breakthrough could pave the way to their ultimate goal of developing gene edited chickens which are fully immune and which do not pass on the virus.

This publicly-funded UK research is recognised as being well ahead of other efforts around the world to breed genetic resistance or to develop effective vaccines against bird flu, and may hold the key to stemming H5N1 transmission from wild birds to farmed poultry on a global basis.

We note that, only today, a report on biosecurity from the Tony Blair Institute has also highlighted the significant potential for gene editing in farmed animals to help reduce the impact of disease and prevent the risk of future pandemics in the human population.

To enable genetic innovation such as this to reach the market, therefore, we urge the UK Government to act without delay in bringing forward the secondary legislation needed to implement the Precision Breeding Act for farmed animals, as it has for plants.

We have the potential through these technologies to deliver solutions to pressing global health threats. Why would we not use them?

Yours ever

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George Freeman MP Chair, APPG Science & Technology in Agriculture