



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

PRESS RELEASE

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Defra urged to activate gene editing rules for livestock after positive EU scientific opinion

A prominent rural MP has called on Defra Ministers to push ahead with implementing rules under the Precision Breeding Act which will free up the use of gene editing in farmed animals. He said this was urgently needed to help mitigate the threat posed by livestock disease to animal health, welfare and farmers' livelihoods.

Charlie Dewhirst, Conservative MP for Bridlington and the Wolds and a member of the EFRA Committee, issued the call after the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) gave the green light to the technology's safety in a draft scientific opinion on the use of gene editing in animals, which concluded that: *"Off-target mutations from genome editing are similar in nature to those from conventional breeding and do not pose novel hazards. Consequently, no new potential hazards, and thus, no new risks to humans, animals, or the environment are anticipated."*

Mr Dewhirst was speaking at the opening ceremony of an Agri-Science Week in Parliament event hosted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, of which he is vice-chair. Addressing an audience of politicians, scientists and industry leaders, which included Defra food security minister Daniel Zeichner MP, Defra chief scientific adviser Professor Gideon Henderson and Food Standards Agency chief executive Katie Pettifer, he said:

"Agri-Science Week includes a strong focus on precision breeding, demonstrating how new genetic technologies in agriculture can support more sustainable and resilient farming systems, and can help to make our food safer, and more nutritious. This emphasis on precision breeding is especially timely following the Government's recent confirmation that it will bring forward the secondary legislation needed to implement the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 for plants by the end of March 2025. That announcement is very welcome news indeed, and Ministers can count on the support of members and stakeholders of this Group as the legislation proceeds through both Houses of Parliament.

"At this stage, however, the Government's legislative plans relate only to plants. The scope of the Precision Breeding Act also covers farmed animals, but there has been no firm commitment to a similar timetable for introducing parallel implementing rules for livestock. I would urge Ministers to bring this forward at the earliest possible opportunity.

"Only last week, the European Food Safety Authority issued its draft scientific opinion, requested by the European Commission, on the use of gene editing in animals, which confirmed that the use of these techniques poses no new risks to humans, animals, or the environment. This scientific advice directly supports the underpinning rationale of the Precision Breeding Act that precision bred products pose no new or additional risks compared to conventionally bred. They should not, therefore, be subject to new or additional regulatory requirements."

From a pig farming background and a former policy adviser at the National Pig Association, Mr Dewhurst stressed the importance of using every available technology to tackle the devastating impact of disease in livestock production.

“As someone with strong links to the British livestock sector, I understand only too well that from every perspective - economic, food production, animal health and welfare – one of the greatest challenges facing the industry is disease. Any unwarranted delay in implementing the Act’s provisions would be a major setback for prospects to use genome editing to tackle virulent livestock diseases such as bird flu in poultry, porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome (PRRS) and African Swine Fever in pigs, bovine TB and viral diarrhoea in cattle, and sea lice infestation in farmed salmon. As this week’s exhibit demonstrates, British livestock science is at the forefront of this research.

“With new bird flu cases being reported in the UK, the first case of foot and mouth disease for nearly 40 years just reported in Germany, and the US having recorded its first human death from bird flu, the importance of enabling all possible scientific solutions, and of the Government moving forward at the earliest possible opportunity with implementing rules for precision breeding in farmed animals, cannot be over-stated,” said Mr Dewhurst.

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Notes

A copy of the draft EFSA scientific opinion on new developments in biotechnology applied to animals is available to [download here](#).

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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