



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

26 February 2021

All-Party Group welcomes clarification of Co-op position on gene editing

Following media reports that the Co-op had said no to gene edited products in its stores, members and stakeholders of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture have welcomed unambiguous clarification, in a letter from The Co-operative Group chief executive Steve Murrells to Lord Cameron of Dillington, that:

“I would like to be clear that the news release and subsequent media coverage you refer to was issued without our approval, gives the false impression that we have signed up as a supporter to the #NotInMySupermarket campaign, and therefore does not reflect our views nor our approach. Here at the Co-op, we have not adopted a new position on gene editing, nor are we seeking to pre-empt the outcome of the ongoing Government consultation on the regulation of genetic technologies.”

The Co-op was responding to a joint letter signed by Lord Cameron of Dillington, Lord Rooker, Baroness Hayman and Lord Krebs seeking clarification of the Co-op position and urging the supermarket chain to keep an open mind, listen to the science, protect consumer choice and, most of all, not to take options off the table at such an early stage which have the potential to help mitigate and tackle the effects of climate change, to reduce input use in agriculture without compromising on productivity, and to safeguard the quality and affordability of our food supply both here and in less developed parts of the world.

The exchange of email letters is copied below for information.

To: Jo Whitfield, Chief Executive, Food, Co-op

Dear Ms Whitfield

Recent media reports suggest that the Co-op has taken the decision not to stock gene edited products – pre-empting the outcome of an ongoing Government consultation on the best way to regulate these advanced breeding techniques, and before any such products are even available.

The Co-op is right to point to gene editing as one of the technologies that may help to address the challenges facing our food system. It is therefore difficult to understand why the Co-op would simply close the door on a technology with such enormous potential to help mitigate and tackle climate change, to reduce input use in agriculture without compromising productivity, and to improve prospects for the quality, affordability and availability of food both here and in less developed parts of the world.

There are currently no gene edited products for the Co-op to reject, and the Co-op’s stance is therefore likely to do most damage to prospects for research activity and investment at this early stage in the technology’s development. Professor Sean Mayes, of the University of

Nottingham, told us that the UK adopting a more science-based and proportionate approach to regulating gene editing techniques could mark a 'water-shed moment' for agricultural development and improvement in poorer regions of the world.

As cross-party members of the APPG on Science and Technology in Agriculture, we led calls for the Government to consult on this issue: whether to stick with the EU's restrictive rules classifying gene edited products as GMOs, or whether to re-align our rules with other countries such as Japan, Australia, Brazil, Canada and Argentina, which do not regulate these precision breeding techniques in the same way as GMOs. The position is also under review at EU level, with a Commission study expected to provide recommendations on future regulation of gene editing techniques in April this year.

Media reports surrounding the Co-op's decision appear to imply that taking gene edited products out of the scope of GMO rules would leave them 'unregulated'. But of course that is patently untrue. All new plant varieties, for example, whatever their breeding method, must undergo rigorous field and laboratory testing over at least two years prior to their approval, while seed can only be marketed under strict conditions of plant health, quality and freedom from impurities. Indeed the UK registration of plant varieties is one of the most advanced, outcomes-focused regulatory systems in existence, since it ensures that only varieties offering a demonstrable improvement over older varieties can be authorised for marketing. At the same time, plant breeders operate under the over-arching provisions of the Food Safety Act and Environmental Protection Act and, where applicable, novel foods regulations.

Numerous scientific studies and reports have confirmed that gene editing techniques pose no greater food safety or environmental concerns than conventional breeding methods, and indeed gene edited products are indistinguishable from their conventionally bred counterparts. We believe it therefore makes sense to regulate them proportionately.

It is particularly regrettable that the Co-op should have adopted this position prior to the conclusion of the Government consultation, since our Group is at an advanced stage of finalising a proposal, with support from plant breeders, seed suppliers, farmers, grain merchants, primary processors and food manufacturers, which would introduce new regulatory provision for transparency in relation to the use of gene editing techniques to develop new plant varieties. Such a commitment would facilitate choice by providing the information supply chains would need to differentiate in response to market demand.

We would be pleased to discuss this regulatory proposal with you, and would respectfully urge you to keep an open mind on these technologies as potential solutions to the challenges facing our food system. We believe those pressures are so great and unpredictable that we need to keep all options on the table. We do hope you will agree.

With kind regards

Lord Cameron of Dillington
Lord Rooker
Professor the Lord Krebs
Baroness Hayman

Dear Lord Cameron,

Many thanks for your email.

Firstly, I would like to be clear that the news release and subsequent media coverage you refer to was issued without our approval, gives the false impression that we have signed up as a supporter to the #NotInMySupermarket campaign, and therefore does not reflect our views nor our approach. Here at the Co-op, we have not adopted a new position on gene editing, nor are we seeking to pre-empt the outcome of the ongoing Government consultation on the regulation of genetic technologies.

Secondly, a little more background on our approach. Co-op's current policy prohibits the use of genetically modified (GM) crops, ingredients or additives in Co-op brand products, and has done since 1999, but in considering our approach we are absolutely committed to scientific and evidence-based policy making.

Given that genetic modification is one of several technologies and innovations that may help to address the challenges facing our global food system, our view is that there is certainly merit in exploring the benefits of gene editing technology, and particularly the role it could play in improving the sustainable production of food. For this reason, we're not opposed to the technology itself and continually review our position to make sure it reflects emerging evidence, as well as the beliefs and values of our customers. As with any new technological advancement, we believe it is important consumers are assured about any food safety, environmental and economic impacts, which in turn requires independent scrutiny and clear regulation on its use from Government.

I hope this clarifies our policy and reassures you that I agree with your view on the importance of exploring all the potential solutions to the challenges facing our food system, including – in the proper time and pursuing a science based approach – gene editing.

Thank you again for engaging with us on this important topic; if you have any further questions, then please don't hesitate to ask.

Best wishes,

Steve

Steve Murrells
Chief Executive
The Co-operative Group

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.

Follow the APPG on Twitter @appg_agscience

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