



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

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Scientific, veterinary and farming leaders sign open statement of support for farmed animal provisions in the Precision Breeding Bill

Leading organisations and individuals across the scientific, breeding, farming, veterinary and input supply sectors have signed an open statement of support for the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill currently going through Parliament, and for the potential role of new breeding technologies such as gene editing in delivering more sustainable, high-welfare UK livestock research and production.

As Peers prepare to debate the Bill at Second Reading in the House of Lords on Monday (21 November) the open statement, co-ordinated by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, includes a clear expression of support for the inclusion of farmed animals, noting that the Bill does not seek to replace or change existing farm animal welfare regulations or statutory controls on early-stage laboratory research, which will continue to apply to precision-bred animals in the same way as conventionally bred livestock.

Claims by some campaign groups that intensive livestock farming is at a tipping point and that gene editing will further entrench poor welfare and animal suffering are firmly rejected in the statement, which provides examples to demonstrate that the direction of travel for animal health and welfare on British farms is positive and improving year by year.

The statement also highlights the progress made by farm animal breeders in recent decades to adopt more balanced breeding programmes, based on an improved understanding of genomics and genetic function:

“These technologies have as much to offer organic or extensive free-range producers, for example, who routinely use the most advanced livestock genetics in their farming systems today, precisely because they offer a better balance of production, sustainability, health and welfare factors.”

Highlighting the potential application of precision breeding technologies to address previously intractable health and welfare challenges such as avian influenza in poultry, African Swine Fever and Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS) in pigs, the statement also underlines the ethical implications of not embracing and enabling the use of these technologies:

“The Precision Breeding Bill will provide greater certainty to scientists and stimulate more R&D activity and investment in research. Following the devastating Covid pandemic, and as the country faces its worst bird flu outbreak ever after the disease over-summered in the UK for the first time, it is important to consider the ethical implications of not embracing and enabling the use of these technologies, both to support improvements in the health and welfare of farmed animals, and to reduce the risk of zoonoses which could lead to future pandemics in the human population. The UK has established capacity and strengths in academic and commercial research in livestock genetics. Faced with the challenges of climate change and a predicted doubling of global demand for meat protein by 2050, the Precision Breeding Bill presents an opportunity to cement the UK’s position as a global leader in productive, sustainable, high welfare farmed animal production.”

Welcoming the strength of support for the open statement across such a wide cross-section of interests, Professor Lord Trees, vice-chair of the All-Party Group and the only veterinarian in the House of Lords said:

“Disease is arguably the single biggest welfare issue in rearing farm animals. Precision breeding techniques such as gene editing offer the potential to accelerate the development of disease resistant breeds which would not only alleviate animal suffering but also reduce drug and chemical use with positive effects for problems such as anti-microbial resistance and environmental pollution. I hope this open statement sends a clear signal to friends and colleagues across the House of the opportunity we have through the Bill to support major progress in farmed animal research and production.”

ENDS

Notes

A copy of the open statement and list of signatories is attached. The statement is also available on the APPG website under Group News at

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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