



Gene editing: It's time to change up the narrative, ScotGov

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From every conceivable direction, the Scottish Government's position on gene editing places Scotland's farmers and growers at a disadvantage. Now the wind in Europe appears to be blowing in the opposite direction, and with countries such as New Zealand revisiting their anti-GM policies, it's time for ScotGov to change the narrative. It is time for Scotland to embrace the potential of these technologies to help deliver a more productive, sustainable and climate-resilient future for Scottish agriculture, writes Finlay Carson MSP, convenor of the Rural Affairs Committee in the Scottish Parliament.

Throughout its passage in the Westminster Parliament, the SNP-led Scottish Government maintained its narrow-minded opposition to the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act, no doubt egged on by coalition partners in the Green Party.

The purpose of this legislation is to diverge from outdated rules inherited from the EU, by removing more precise breeding techniques such as gene editing from the scope of restrictive GMO rules, and adopting a similar regulatory stance to other countries around the world, including Canada, Japan, Australia, Argentina, Brazil and the USA.

Time and time again, Scotland's Ministers batted away [appeals](#) from scientists, farmers and breeders, who highlighted Scotland's research strengths in these technologies, the improvements they offer in terms of faster, more precise delivery of desired traits, and the opportunities to develop more sustainable, productive and climate-resilient farming systems as a result.

But ScotGov remained immovable, insisting that Scotland will continue to regulate gene edited products as GMOs, and that the Scottish Government remains opposed to the use of GM in farming "to protect the clean, green brand of Scotland's £15 billion food and drink industry."

Setting aside the hypocrisy at play here, when virtually every livestock farmer in Scotland is routinely feeding imported GM corn or soya (they can't afford not to), there is another, more constitutionally motivated angle to the ScotGov position on this issue.

In addition to its misguided hostility towards gene editing technologies as a potential threat to the clean, green image of Scotland's food and drink sector, ScotGov has consistently stated that its preference is to remain aligned with the EU, which has historically also maintained a largely anti-GM position.

However, according to a recently [leaked version](#) of draft regulatory proposals on new genomic techniques (NGTs) due to be unveiled by the European Commission next month, the EU's approach may be about to change quite radically. Mirroring the Precision Breeding Act in England, the draft EU proposals set out plans for gene edited crops which could have occurred naturally or through conventional breeding to be treated similarly to conventionally bred varieties – ie not requiring separate GMO authorisation, risk assessment, traceability, labelling or coexistence.

Furthermore, the supporting rationale behind the proposals makes clear that the impact of Covid 19, war in Ukraine, and recent record drought conditions in Europe are front and centre in the Commission's thinking. According to the accompanying impact study, these issues have highlighted EU agriculture's vulnerability to price shocks, with a "global spike in prices of inputs needed for agri-food production, in particular energy, animal feed and feed additives, and fertilisers," and noting that "gene-editing technologies will have far reaching implications for agri-food and social systems in terms of their potential for improving and securing production of food." The leaked Commission document adds that access to gene editing techniques will create an advantage for the EU in securing supplies of food and feed, with new varieties better adapted to stand up to the challenges created by climate change.

If these leaked documents prove to be the real deal, where will that leave the ScotGov position?

Perhaps now we will really discover how in hock the SNP are to the anti-science ideologues in the Green Party, because it is time for a rapid change in the Scottish Government's rhetoric on the precision breeding issue. It is time for Scotland to embrace the potential of these technologies to help deliver a more productive, sustainable and climate-resilient future for Scottish agriculture.

And we need look no further than our friends in New Zealand, with whom Scotland has such strong historical, cultural, political, sporting and farming links, to recognise that a potential change in policy and narrative on this issue can happen quickly and decisively.

For many years, New Zealand has maintained a strong anti-GM position, and has benefited from marketing its farmed produce as GMO-free. However, the sustainability of that position has been seriously challenged over the past couple of weeks after the main opposition National Party made a [manifesto commitment](#) ahead of the October elections to reverse the country's current ban on GMOs and gene editing. According to National's science and innovation

spokesperson, Judith Collins, the GMO ban is now costing New Zealand and making it harder to reach climate change goals.

Shortly after the National Party announcement, New Zealand's leading dairy company [Fonterra](#), closely followed by the country's largest meat processing firm [Silver Fern Farms](#), announced their support for a review of the current GMO ban. They cited the need to adapt to climate change as a major factor.

It has subsequently been [reported](#) that New Zealand's Prime Minister, Chris Hipkins, has over-ruled his own environment minister and requested a review of the legislation on genetic technologies in the wake of the National Party policy announcement, potentially even paving the way for a bipartisan approach to the issue.

Is ScotGov prepared to listen to the science, and show the same responsiveness and leadership on this critical issue? Because to date, far from protecting Scotland's farmers, the Scottish Government is putting our industry at a disadvantage.

More fall-out from Scotland's rejection of the Precision Breeding Act has emerged in recent weeks, after it was reported that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is preparing to introduce an England-only national listing system for crop varieties bred using precision breeding techniques.

Why? Because the plant varieties and seeds regulations - which oversee the approval and marketing of all new crop varieties - are UK-wide in scope, and Defra officials are concerned that the devolved administrations, sitting outside the Precision Breeding Act, will move to block or hinder applications.

This could be a very worrying development. An England-only National List would mean varieties not being tested and assessed under Scottish growing conditions. Would plant breeders favour an England-only list for other varieties too, especially crop species not currently grown on a large scale in Scotland?

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