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UK scientists welcome positive signal from Defra Minister on precision breeding plans

The two scientists behind a [joint letter](#) urging early action by the new Labour Government to implement the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 in England have welcomed what they describe as a ‘positive response’ from the Defra Minister responsible, Daniel Zeichner MP.

Following the General Election in July, livestock scientist Professor Helen Sang and plant scientist Professor Tina Barsby wrote an open letter to Ministers in Defra and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, calling for quick and decisive action in adopting the secondary legislation needed to bring the Act’s provisions into force.

Without these detailed implementing rules, which have already been drafted and were notified by Defra to the World Trade Organisation in April this year, the Precision Breeding Act serves no functional purpose, and technologies such as gene editing will continue to be regulated under more restrictive GMO regulations.

Signed by more than 50 leading figures across the scientific and agri-food sectors, including seven heads of UK research institutes and 10 Fellows of the Royal Society, the open letter emphasises that ensuring scientists have access to the best available technologies is critical to building greater food system resilience, developing more sustainable farming systems, and boosting prospects for economic growth.

“The scientific evidence is overwhelming that the products of these technologies pose no greater risks than their conventionally bred counterparts, and yet they can greatly accelerate the development of more climate resilient, higher-yielding crops requiring fewer pesticide and fertiliser inputs, and with improved quality and nutrition,” the open letter states.

In his [response](#), Mr Zeichner thanked all the signatories of the letter for their support for the precision breeding policy, and highlighted the importance of food security as one of Defra’s five strategic priorities. He emphasised that *“innovation is key in supporting our efforts to strengthen food security, enhance resilience and improve agricultural sustainability.”*

“We are now considering how to take forward the regulatory framework outlined in the Act and will share our plans with key interested parties soon,” he continued.

Professor Barsby described the Minister's response as an encouraging signal that the new Government recognises the importance of these new technologies, but she reiterated the early need for clarity on the Government's plans among researchers, innovators and prospective investors in the UK.

“Around the world, countries are moving rapidly to adopt more science-based regulations for gene editing technologies. Thailand recently joined Canada, Australia, Japan, Brazil, Argentina and the USA in adopting regulations which treat precision bred products more like conventional products. New Zealand, which has historically taken a more cautious regulatory approach to genetic technologies, announced last month that it will also introduce new legislation to free up gene editing technologies. With our world-leading science base in genetic research, we cannot afford to be left behind in enabling British science to fulfil its promise of fighting climate change, contributing to food security and delivering nature recovery,” she said.

Professor Sang, who has pioneered research at The Roslin Institute using gene editing to develop bird flu resistance in chickens, also urged Ministers to accelerate implementation of the Precision Breeding Act in relation to farmed animals.

“The timetable for implementing the Precision Breeding Act in relation to farmed animals will inevitably be behind that for plants, as requirements for an animal welfare declaration and the creation of a new welfare advisory body are established. But recent global developments in relation to the spread of livestock disease highlight the need to act sooner rather than later. With a virulent strain of PRRS wiping out pig herds in Spain, African Swine Fever on the march north through Europe, and bird flu virus detected in both dairy cattle and their milk in the US, the importance of enabling all possible solutions, including precision breeding, cannot be over-stated,” she said.

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