

The European Commission's Working Document on "New Genomic Techniques" POLICY BRIEF

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On 29 April 2021, the European Commission published a [report](#) in which it concluded that new GMOs or New Genomic Techniques (NGT) "could provide benefits for EU Society" including improving the sustainability of our food systems, and that the current EU GMO rules were no longer "fit for purpose", paving the way for the deregulation of certain new GMO crops. Such deregulation could entail less stringent safety assessments of new GMOs as well as no longer requiring new GMOs to be labelled or traceable throughout the food supply chain, which currently ensure farmers' and consumers' freedom of choice.

What does the report say?

The report summarizes consultation responses submitted by EU member states and stakeholders (including civil society organizations, farmers' associations and businesses), as well as various EU reports. The Commission's investigation is clearly marked by an effort to suggest a balanced approach. However, there are clear indications that the study does want to set political accents that are serving industry interests:

- The report claims that new GMOs could provide "potential benefits to EU society", including contributing to sustainability by reducing the dependency of farmers on pesticides and helping agriculture to adapt to climate change, and in this way contribute to meeting the targets of the EU Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy.
- It claims that plants produced with new GM techniques which don't involve the introduction of new genetic material are as safe as conventionally bred plants, and that these changes could occur "naturally", despite [growing evidence](#) that new GM techniques carry specific risks, even if no new genes are inserted.
- It recommends to "reap the benefits of innovation" while addressing concerns, and downplays the precautionary principle (which ensures precaution-driven policy making when an environmental or human health hazard is not ruled out while scientific information is uncertain or not complete), by introducing industry stakeholders' support for the "proportionality principle" whereby the level of regulation would be proportional to the level of risk of the GMO.
- Finally, the report is dangerously contesting the European Court of Justice ruling of 2018, by suggesting that the current EU GMO rules are no longer "fit for purpose" as the pace of change in biotech innovation is increasing, and concludes that the current GMO regulation may need to be adapted.

Our view

The disappointing conclusions of the study, which pave the way to the deregulation of certain new GMOs, reflect the relentless efforts of the biotechnology industry to exempt new GMOs from safety regulations. The report, far from being a thorough scientific study, merely summarizes the views of various stakeholders, based on a [biased EU consultation](#) in which the voice given to the biotechnology industry far outweighed those of civil society. By suggesting that EU GMO rules must be re-opened, the Commission is falling into the trap of pursuing techno-fixes rather than investing in, and promoting agroecological systems that, as rightly stated in the Farm to Fork Strategy, benefit farmers, local communities, and the wider environment.

Context

In 2018, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that new GMOs (obtained by new mutagenesis techniques) come within the scope of the GMO directive and are subject to the obligations laid down by that directive, following the precautionary principle. The ECJ ruling means that the new generation of GM crops and seeds should go through safety checks, an authorization process and be labelled before they can be placed on the market, to guarantee farmers, food producers and consumers the right to know whether a food product contains GM organisms or not.

At the end of 2019, the Council of the EU (Member States) requested the European Commission to conduct a study regarding the status of new genomic techniques, and the practical implications of the ECJ ruling (Council Decision (EU) 2019/1904). The Council also requested the EU Commission to inform about measures as a follow-up to the study or some policy options, if deemed necessary.

Slow Food's position on new GMOs

Slow Food has a long-standing position against GMOs due to the risks they present to biodiversity, the threats they pose to small-scale farmers' livelihoods, and to the fact that they are incompatible with an agricultural system based on agroecology. Citizens and farmers must mobilize once more, as a new generation of GMOs are being developed and risk making their way to nature and onto our plates – with irreversible consequences for biodiversity and our common food future. Following the development of “transgenesis” techniques in the 1990s, new genetic engineering techniques such as CRISPR/Cas are used to alter the genome of an organism without introducing foreign genes. These “new GMOs” are presented by the industry as simply being modern plant breeding techniques but this is a gross misrepresentation.

New GMOs present some very similar and some additional risks when compared to “old” GMOs. These risks concern the environment, biodiversity, farmers' sovereignty, and consumers, while at the same time the option to introduce new GMOs fails to address any of the systemic issues of our food system and, if implemented, would block the way to promoting agroecological production methods. In addition, products from GM techniques are covered by patents owned by a handful of multinationals. Patents on plant varieties have negative economic consequences for the agricultural sector, including monopolization and concentration of the seed market. Furthermore, GM agriculture fosters the development of intensive monocultures, frequently in areas without any environmental vocation, posing a growing threat to the survival of traditional varieties and rural communities themselves, who are increasingly deprived of their means of production and livelihoods.

Our demands

- The EU must fully implement the European Court of Justice's ruling of 2018 and ensure that new GMOs remain strictly regulated under the current EU GMO obligations which provide that any GMO must undergo a strict risk assessment, traceability, and must be labelled, in order to be placed on the market.
- The EU must guarantee farmers' and citizens' freedom to choose to grow and eat GMO-free food, which requires the traceability and labelling of new GMOs.
- The EU must support a global moratorium on the environmental release of gene drive organisms for precautionary reasons, as this technology has the power to genetically engineer, decimate or eradicate entire populations of wild organisms, including insects.
- The EU should aim to reduce pesticides use by 80% by 2030 and pursue this target in holistic and circular ways, such as by adopting agroecological practices, organic farming and integrated pest management.
- The EU must invest in research on agroecology, and support farmers to adopt agroecological practices, which can help restore biodiversity, reduce the reliance on external inputs, reduces the ecological footprint of food production, distribution and consumer practices, and boosts the adaptability and resilience of the production system by maintaining the diversity of the agroecosystems. All aspects clearly indicated as tools for achieving the climatical neutrality by 2050.



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