



15/06/2022

LWA Statement on the Gene Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill

On May 25th, the UK Government introduced the [Genetic Technology \(Precision Breeding\) Bill](#); a proposed piece of legislation which would remove regulations on plants and animals that have been modified using 'precision bred' gene-editing techniques. The Bill wants to create a new legal category for these gene-edited organisms - which it misleadingly calls 'Precision Bred Organisms' (PBOs), allowing them to be regulated separately from other Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) which have been created using older methods. If passed, this new legislation would mean that we could see gene-edited foods on our shelves as early as next year.

As a union representing small-scale agroecological farmers and food producers, we are deeply concerned that this Bill will threaten our agroecological farming systems, our autonomy and right to save seed, and the biodiversity upon which we depend; while doing nothing to mitigate the risks associated with novel gene technologies.

PBOs are defined in the Bill as new plant and animal varieties that have been modified using biotechnology to create new traits that could have occurred naturally or by using traditional breeding methods. Whereas GMOs are modified by adding foreign genetic material from *other* species, gene-editing techniques (such as CRISPR Cas-9) create targeted changes to an organism's DNA using genetic material from the *same* species.

Although the Government claims that gene-editing is less risky than GM, we are extremely concerned that a move to completely deregulate these new gene editing technologies purely based on the 'end product' rather than the methods used to achieve it, is a dangerously hasty and poorly judged move. An organism which has been artificially genetically modified is by definition a GMO - and should be regulated accordingly - regardless of the technique used. By calling these new types of GMOs 'Precision Bred Organisms' not only is the language of the bill misleading legislators, but also farmers and the wider public.

As it currently stands, this bill is bad news for small-scale, agroecological and organic farmers for several reasons:

- **Labelling** - The bill currently makes no requirement for new gene-edited foods to be labelled. This means that not only will consumers be in the dark about whether or not they are buying GM products, but it will also leave farmers in the dark as to whether or not they are buying genetically engineered seeds. This is an attack on the rights of farmers to have control and decision-making power over the plants and crops they grow on their farms.
- **Contamination** - Deregulation of gene-edited plants and animals and the subsequent release of these new varieties into our farms and fields could run the risk of contaminating organic crops; either through pollen spread, seed escape, or the mixing of food and feed. Farmers who choose not to grow genetically engineered crops need to be protected from contamination all along the supply chains from field to fork, but the bill does nothing to guarantee this.
- **Decision-making power** - The bill also raises important questions about who gets to decide what happens in our food system and why, and has been introduced by the UK Government despite widespread public opposition. In their 2021 consultation, the government asked the public if they supported the planned changes in regulation of genetic technologies. The overwhelming majority said no, with 85% expressing the view that the genetic technologies used in farming should continue to be regulated in the same way. The decision to push through with deregulation is undemocratic, and reflects the erosion of consumers' and farmers' power to make decisions about the future of their food system.
- **Patents** - We are also concerned that deregulation will result in the emergence of even more new genetically-engineered varieties that are likely to be subject to intellectual property rights that favour large corporations. If large agribusiness companies develop new GMOs to sell commercially, it's likely that they will patent these new varieties thus placing restrictions on farmers' rights to save and share seed.

The logic behind this move - spearheaded by Defra - is grounded in the narrative of 'increasing food security' and 'building climate resilience.' In reality, however, deregulating gene technologies will likely result in an over-reliance on a few novel varieties (as the agribusiness sector tends to focus on a limited amount of profitable crops) which will ultimately leave our food system even more vulnerable to new diseases and external shocks.

It's also cause for concern as the bill plays into the wider 'technofix' rhetoric around climate resilience and social crises. Often, these 'solutions' are disguised as harmless responses to societal and environmental ills, but beneath the surface they are deliberate attempts to line the pockets of the already wealthy without any real regard for people or environmental health.

This rhetoric works deliberately to shift the narrative away from systemic solutions. While we acknowledge that there are many ways technology can support us in adapting to and mitigating the effects of the climate crisis and food insecurity, technological solutions are not the only way forward. At best they are distracting band-aids, at worst, they serve to increase social inequality, consolidate power, and stifle meaningful change.

We know that in order to create a more resilient and just food system, rather than tinkering at the edges with risky technological solutions like gene-editing technologies, we need a mass transformative transition towards food sovereignty. The answer lies in localising our food systems as much as possible, celebrating and protecting diversity in our food systems, valuing food producers, and centring decision making power in the hands of farmers, food producers and local communities.

**The Landworkers' Alliance is a grassroots union of farmers,
forester's and land-based workers in the UK.**