

Super crops or Frankenfoods? EU line on gene-edited seeds under fire from all sides

A leaked proposal from Brussels has everyone talking.



The EU has some of the strictest rules in the world for approving genetically modified crops, but 'new genomic techniques' could be a game changer | Sean Gallup/Getty Images

by [Bartosz Brzeziński](#).

Actions

Brussels wants to allow a new generation of genetically modified foods on your supermarket shelves. But nobody seems to be convinced about the direction it's taking.

Green lawmakers, environmental groups and organic farmers have condemned forthcoming rules on seeds and crops produced using gene-splicing tools like CRISPR-Cas9 — dubbed “new genomic techniques” or NGTs by the European Commission — after a leaked draft confirmed that the EU executive plans to treat some of them as conventional products.

The plant breeding industry, meanwhile, has said that the many caveats aimed at striking a fair balance between encouraging innovation and protecting consumers and the environment will instead create a legal mess and put European companies at a competitive disadvantage.

The draft rules, which the Commission is expected to formally unveil on July 5, were [first published](#) on the ARC2020 website last week.

“This leaked proposal is deeply worrying. For some new GMOs, the Commission wants to abolish all requirements for risk assessment, traceability and consumer labeling,” said Green MEP Benoît Biteau. “The multinationals would win on all accounts, whereas farmers and consumers would lose out. We cannot let this happen! The battle against the new GMOs has only just begun.”

Industry group Euroseeds, which has lobbied to ensure that NGT products are not treated as GMOs, welcomed the aim of the new legislation but criticized its complexity and inconsistency, saying it fails to take into account the reality of agriculture.

The group expressed “serious doubts” about many elements of the law and said they risked turning what should be an administrative approval process into a political battle.

Matter of course

The EU has some of the strictest rules in the world for approving genetically modified crops, and GMOs remain a divisive issue among [governments](#) and [citizens](#) alike. As a result, only one GM crop is grown in the bloc — an insect-resistant variety of corn — and only in [Portugal and Spain](#). However, the EU [imports](#) hundreds of millions of tons of GM animal feed every year from countries like Brazil, Argentina and the U.S.

But Brussels is betting big that NGTs will be the real game changer.

Unlike traditional GMOs, NGTs do not require the introduction of any foreign genetic material into the crop’s DNA. For this reason, the Commission says that many gene-edited plants would be virtually identical to those obtained using conventional breeding methods — only the technology makes it possible to obtain specific traits like resistance to drought or pests with greater precision.

The Commission also says that unlike the gene-splicing of yesteryear, which prioritized the development of GM crops resistant to massive doses of herbicides like glyphosate, NGTs [would instead lead](#) to the proliferation of crops that are healthier, more climate-resilient, and require fewer pesticides.

Environmental groups are not buying it, arguing that because NGTs have only been around for just over a decade, questions remain about their supposed safety. The NGOs also say that the touted benefits of NGTs are a [distraction](#) from “truly sustainable agriculture” practices like agroecology and organic farming.

“The assumption the Commission makes that new GMOs would lead to more sustainability [is] based on industry’s claims, instead of real evidence,” said Nina Holland, a researcher at watchdog group Corporate Europe Observatory. “In reality, this is a giveaway to the biotech seed firms like Bayer, Corteva and BASF.”

The EU Ombudsman [opened an investigation](#) earlier this year following a complaint by Corporate Europe Observatory and another NGO, Friends of the Earth Europe, over the Commission’s handling of a stakeholder consultation on the new rules, which they described as “very biased.” The inquiry is ongoing.

To be or NGT

According to the leaked proposal, not all gene-edited products will be treated in the same way.

The Commission will introduce two categories of NGT crops, each with a different procedure for placing them on the market. Crops whose genes have been edited to make them herbicide-tolerant will continue to fall under existing GMO rules.

Gene-edited crops will be allowed on the EU market without approval or consumer labeling if they are considered “conventional-like,” meaning they contain no more than 20 specific genetic modifications from the original plant. These crops only need to be notified and the Commission can decide that they are “conventional-like” without the approval of member countries.

Gene-edited crops not considered “conventional-like” will have to undergo EU authorization. Existing traceability and labeling requirements for GMOs will apply, but other requirements, such as the submission of an event-specific detection test or a monitoring plan, may be waived. EU member states will not be able to ban the cultivation of these crops.

However, all NGTs will be banned from organic farming, just like traditional GMOs. Eric Gall, of the non-profit IFOAM Organics Europe, said his sector was in favor of keeping NGTs out, but did not see how the Commission’s proposal could ensure this.

Euroseeds, on the other hand, called the move “illogical and discriminatory.”

The industry group also said that creating different categories of NGT crops would put the EU at odds with other jurisdictions [such as the U.K.](#) and would place a “major burden” on developers. Euroseeds also questioned the legal basis for lumping herbicide-tolerant NGT seeds and crops with traditional GMOs.