

International biodiversity conference in Mexico: German Minister for the Environment opposed to the release of organisms with a 'gene-drive'

The uncontrolled spread of genetically engineered organisms is already a reality

4 December 2016 / The German Minister for the Environment, Barbara Hendricks, has taken a clear stand against any release of genetically engineered organisms inheriting a 'gene drive'. In a statement she says, "I share your concern that 'gene drives' can severely impact ecosystems, and believe that special precautions are needed in research and risk assessment. From an environmental point of view, I do not think that a release of organisms inheriting a 'gene drive' can be justified with our current level of knowledge." Her letter was sent to civil society organisations (CSOs) in Germany ahead of the 13 Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which will take place from 4 - 17 December in Mexico.

Besides genetic information, so-called 'gene-drives' also change the frequency of heredity. Gene drives are created by using new methods of genetic engineering, known as CRISPR-Cas. Once inserted into an organism, the newly introduced DNA will be transferred homozygously in each generation, and therefore spread throughout populations much faster than would be the case with natural heredity. Currently, there are ongoing discussions about whether this method should be applied in the genetic engineering of natural populations, such as insects, weeds and wild animals. Once released, these organisms can cause irreversible damage in ecological systems – and there are no known measures that can be taken to withdraw them from the environment.

"We very much appreciate Minister Hendricks' statement and hope that the German government will strongly support the demand for a moratorium at the CBD conference. At the same time, we expect the German government to take action against any uncontrolled spread of genetically engineered organisms in the environment. These problems deserve much more attention and strong political action," says Christoph Then for Testbiotech.

Several cases of uncontrolled spread of transgenes into native populations have already become evident in the last few years: For example, cotton plants in Mexico, oil seed rape in North America, Japan, Australia and Switzerland and grasses in the US. Beyond that, the DNA from genetically engineered plants has been found to persist in regional seed samples such as Mexican maize and rice from China.

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