

Keep gene scissors under control!

Appeal to politicians

18 May 2021 / In a joint appeal, science, agricultural, beekeeping and environmental protection organisations have criticised a controversial EU Commission report on the regulation of plants and animals derived from new methods of genetic engineering (New GE, genome editing). They are warning that the report does not sufficiently address the risks to health and the environment - and may well lead to political decisions being made which harm the precautionary principle.

The Small Farmers Organisation (AbL), the Aurelia Foundation, the Gene-ethical Network (GeN), the Society for Ecological Research (GeSöF), the Initiative for GE-free seeds and breeding (IG Saatgut), Save our Seeds! (SOS) and Testbiotech are all demanding strict regulation of New GE. Their urgent appeal "Keep gene scissors under control!" addresses specific uses of New GE, such as CRISPR/Cas gene scissor applications, which can profoundly change the biological characteristics of plants and animals without inserting transgenes. The organisations are demanding that all organisms derived from such processes, including any future applications, are regulated under current EU GMO legislation.

"If - for example - the oil content and quality of plants is changed by New GE, this may impact pollinators and food webs. Therefore, the risks to insects, such as bees, need full and detailed assessment," explains Bernd Rodekoher from the Aurelia Foundation, which is especially active in protecting honey bees.

The organisations point out that there are no sufficiently reliable scientific criteria that make it possible to declare specific categories of New GE applications to be safe. Safety of specific organisms can only be concluded after a case by case examination of the risks - but not in advance or solely by taking the intended characteristics of the GE organisms into account, as it is suggested by the EU Commission.

"New GE has a huge potential for technical intervention associated with complex risks and possible damage that might only become apparent after a longer period of time. Therefore, from the perspective of agriculture, it is time to strengthen the precautionary principle," says Annemarie Volling from the German Small Farmers Organisation (AbL). "In addition to the intended changes and traits, unintended effects arising from multistep processes in New GE need to be fully taken into account."

Despite many facts and findings showing the need for detailed risk assessment, there are signs that the EU Commission may partially, or wholly, exempt many plants and animals from mandatory risk assessment. These plants and animals might even be considered equal to plants derived from conventional breeding. Unintended effects arising from processes involved in New GE would not be examined at all. In effect, this would give way to extreme demands being made by industry and affiliated experts. The above organisations are jointly warning that the implementation of these plans would inevitably lead to a substantial risk to health and the environment.

"It is not only imperative that we ban obviously dangerous New GE applications, such as gene drives, from being released into the environment. We also need to prevent apparently less dangerous New GE applications from becoming a pervasive threat in the fields," warns Benny Haerlin, spokesperson for Save our Seeds!

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Links

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