

Testbiotech comment on the Statement „Towards a scientifically justified, differentiated regulation of genome edited plants in the EU“ published by Leopoldina, DFG and German Academies of Sciences and Humanities

Subtitle: TESTBIOTECH Background 30 - 9 - 2020

In 2019, the National Academy of Sciences (Leopoldina), the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities published a 'Statement' on genome editing, also known as new genomic techniques or new techniques of genetic engineering (New GE).

The authors of the 'Statement' claim that there are no specific risks associated with the application of genetic engineering in plant breeding and are demanding changes to EU GMO regulation. As a consequence, most genetically engineered organisms would no longer undergo mandatory risk assessment and approval process as requested by current EU regulation.

Institutions representing the highest scientific standards, such as Leopoldina and DFG, should carefully avoid any conflict of interest. However, several of the experts involved in the Statement have specific interests in patent applications in the field, and some also have close affiliations with industry. The involvement of a substantial number of experts with vested interests in New GE applications undermines the credibility of the Statement. One gets the impression that highly regarded scientific institutions are at risk of being used as a platform for lobby groups.

Bias in composition of the experts group had a strong impact on the content of the Statement not being in accordance with the necessary scientific standards: instead of performing a detailed analysis of the differences between previous methods of GE and New GE, many assumptions are made which are not, or not sufficiently, based on science. In summary, the technical potentials and the risks of New GE are far more complex than presented in the Statement.

As shown in several more recent publications, the need for detailed risk assessment cannot be limited to organisms with additionally inserted gene sequences. Without strict regulation of New GE, the uncontrolled release of large numbers of organisms has to be expected with biological characteristics not developed gradually through evolution. This would result in the substantial likelihood of damage to ecosystems, agriculture, forestry and food production.

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