

Regulating genome edited organisms as GMOs has negative consequences for agriculture, society and economy

On July 25th, the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) ruled that organisms obtained by modern forms of mutagenesis such as CRISPR are not exempt from the EU GMO legislation. Consequently, genome edited organisms must comply with the strict conditions of the EU GMO legislation. This is in stark contrast with the opinion of the Advocate-General of the Court, which was published in January of this year and advised ruling otherwise. We regret the purely process-based interpretation of the legislation by the Court and conclude that the EU GMO legislation does not correctly reflect the current state of scientific knowledge. Organisms that have undergone simple and targeted genome edits by means of precision breeding and which do not contain foreign genes are at least as safe as if they were derived from classical breeding techniques. Therefore, we call upon all European authorities to quickly respond to this ruling and alter the legislation such that organisms containing such edits are not subject to the provisions of the GMO Directive but instead fall under the regulatory regime that applies to classically bred varieties. In the longer term, the GMO Directive should be thoroughly revised to correctly reflect scientific progress in biotechnology.

There are many reasons why agriculture in Europe and around the globe must become more sustainable. Agricultural practices put pressure on our environment, we are faced with a growing population (mounting to an estimated 10 billion mouths to feed by 2050), and climate change poses increasing challenges for crops – climate measurements from the summer of 2018 underline the urgency of this message.

Time is a luxury we don't have. Reducing the environmental footprint of agriculture and adapting farming to a changing climate are imperative. For example, crops that are more tolerant to rapidly changing and harsher environments will be crucial for the success of tomorrow's food production approaches. To address challenges like this and meet food production goals efficiently, we will need to use all knowledge and technical means available and thus also new technologies, specifically biotechnology. One of the latest breakthroughs in this field is precision breeding, an innovative crop breeding method based on genome editing. Crops developed with precision breeding could help the farmer to minimize inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides. Precision breeding can also contribute to tailoring crops to a specific area, taking into account the environmental factors of a certain region. E.g. having plants that are drought resistant could mean higher crop yields without increasing arable land.

Taking traditional breeding to the next level

The search to introduce additional genetic variation in crops is anything but new. Plant breeding started around 8,000 BC, when farmers selected seeds from crops with the best characteristics obtained through spontaneous genetic mutations and crossbred them to produce new crop varieties with desirable properties. In more recent times, chemicals and radiation are applied to incite these mutations. This type of conventional mutagenesis is exempt from the provisions of the GMO legislation because of its long safety record. Nevertheless, this method incites hundreds or even thousands of random mutations with unknown effects and consequences. Mutations leading to non-intended changes then must be removed during the further breeding process, which is very time consuming and not always successful.

New genome editing technologies follow the same principle, but with higher efficiency and precision, as they apply only one or a few targeted mutations – the type of changes that can also occur naturally or through traditional mutagenic approaches. Recent breakthroughs in plant research allow breeders to know exactly where the change will occur and to better predict the effects of the changes. That is why these techniques are called **precision breeding**. In addition, no DNA from non-related species is present in the final crop, in contrast to GMOs.

What the ECJ ruling means

It is generally concluded that the ECJ ruling means that the crops obtained through this type of precision breeding must comply with the strict GMO directive. In practice, the implications are far-reaching. European agricultural innovation based on precision breeding will come to a halt because of the high threshold that this EU GMO legislation presents. This will hinder progress in sustainable agriculture and will give a competitive disadvantage to plant breeding industries in Europe. The impacts on our society and economy will be enormous.

From a scientific point of view, the ruling makes no sense. Crops containing small genome edits are at least as safe as crops obtained through classical mutagenesis or conventional breeding. But more importantly, we find the ruling irresponsible in the face of the world's current far-reaching agricultural challenges.

The ruling proves that current EU GMO legislation is outdated and not in line with recent scientific evidence. As a result, it is crucial that the legislation be adapted such that organisms containing small edits are not subject to the provisions of the GMO legislation, but instead fall under the regime that applies to conventionally bred varieties. Additionally, a more

thorough revision of the legislation is necessary for GMOs and new breeding techniques to correctly reflect scientific progress in biotechnology.

Agricultural innovation will miss an important opportunity

Let's make these consequences a bit more tangible. The strict legislation will make precision breeding hyper-expensive and, by consequence, a privilege of just a few large multinational companies. As such, European farmers will miss out on a new generation of hardier and more nutritious crop varieties that are urgently needed to respond to the results of climate change.

For example, diseases and pests from southern areas are rapidly spreading due to increasing temperatures. Switching off certain genes could make crops resistant to these diseases without the use of new pesticides. This applies particularly to crops that reproduce asexually, like potatoes, bananas and strawberries. These crops are more susceptible to diseases because offspring are genetically identical to their parent plants, leading to a lack of diversity. The same principle applies to drought: a significant problem many regions in the world are facing right now. On top of that, precision breeding is also ideal to improve food quality and safety, such as the breeding of new crop varieties with fewer allergens.

Societal and economic impacts

Europe is in a leading position in terms of innovative agricultural research. This has led to the formation of dynamic biotech clusters consisting of numerous innovative start-ups and corporate partnerships. Many of these (small) European seed-breeding companies embrace the new technologies, as they can be implemented relatively cheaply and quickly, and because they can democratize the research and development of new agricultural products.

However, the ruling of the ECJ forces companies to go through a very long and expensive regulatory process. For entrepreneurs engaged in start-up projects involving precision breeding and their potential investors, this creates a low probability of market admission for products developed through precision breeding. Due to this significant uncertainty and additional risk, smaller biotech companies will seek refuge elsewhere. SMEs and investors might consider it too great a risk to develop activities in this hostile environment, ultimately leading to job losses in the sector. Additionally, we risk a brain drain effect when plant researchers leave Europe for better job opportunities abroad.

This also means that in Europe, developing genome-edited crops is only financially feasible for large (multinational) companies and for application in large, broad-acre crops such as maize and soy. In other words, Europe is pushing technology back into the hands of the big

market players. This is in huge contrast with countries that have adopted more flexible regulations. In such countries, universities, government institutions and small companies are poised to lead the precision-breeding revolution in agriculture. For example, US regulators have taken the view that genome-edited crops are not a problem as long as they do not contain any foreign genes and are therefore not genetically different from crops developed through traditional breeding processes. As a result, genome-edited crops will soon appear on the American market. Meanwhile, relative lower production costs in non-European areas will lead to more food and feed imports in the EU.

Summary

Subjecting crops obtained through modern genome editing to GMO regulations will deny European consumers, producers, researchers and entrepreneurs important opportunities in sustainable agriculture. Therefore, an urgent review and amendment of the European legislation on new breeding technologies is needed. In the short term, the legislation should be altered such that crops with small DNA adaptations obtained through genome editing are **not subject to the provisions of the GMO Directive but instead fall under the regulatory regime that applies to classically bred varieties**. In the long term, new regulations for GMOs should be developed that are adapted to modern breeding techniques. This new directive should provide more legal certainty and evaluate new crop varieties on a scientific basis.

We therefore urge European policy makers to act to safeguard Europe’s competitiveness on all levels.

Signatures:

From Austria:	
Magnus Nordborg, Scientific Director GMI	
Hubert Hasenauer, Rector at BOKU Christian Obinger, Vice-Rector for Research and Innovation	
Wolfgang Knoll and Anton Plimon, Managing Directors of the AIT Austrian Institute of Technology	

Thomas Herzinger, President of the Institute of Science and Technology (IST) Austria
 Jiri Friml, Group Leader at the the Institute of Science and Technology (IST) Austria



From Belgium:

Jo Bury and Johan Cardoen, Managing Directors VIB
 Dirk Inzé, Science Director VIB-UGent Center for Plant Systems Biology



Joris Relaes, Administrator-General ILVO



Luc Sels, Rector KU Leuven



Rik Van de Walle, Rector Ghent University



Claire Périlleux, Professor at ULiège



François Chaumont, Professor at UCLouvain





Geert Angenon, Professor at VUB



Nathalie Verbruggen, Professor at ULB







From Bulgaria:





Atanas Atanassov, Professor at Joint Genomic Center	
Ivan Atanassov, Director Agrobioinstitute	

From Cyprus:	
Vassilis Fotopoulos, Professor at Cyprus University of Technology	

From Czech republic:	
Karel Riha, Deputy Director for Research, CEITEC Masaryk University	
Tomáš Zima, Rector Charles University	
Martin Vagner, Director of the Institute of Experimental Botany AS CR	
Jiri Hasek, Director of the Institute of Microbiology, Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) Jana Peknicova, Director of the Institute of Biotechnology, Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) Eva Bartova, Director of the Institute of Biophysics, Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) Frantisek Foret, Director of the Institute of Analytical Chemistry, Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) Jan Kopecky, Director of the Institute of Physiology, Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) Frantisek Marec, Director of the Institute of Entomology, Biology Centre of the Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) Libbor Grubhoffer, Director of the Institute of Plant Molecular Biology of the Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS)	



Ivo Frébort, Executive Director, Centre of the Region Haná for Biotechnological and Agricultural Research	
Vojtech Adam, Vice-Rector at the Faculty of AgriSciences, Mendel University, Brno and Head of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry	



From Denmark:	
Poul Erik Jensen, Head of Copenhagen Plant Science Centre Svend Christensen, Head of the Department of Plant and Environmental Sciences in Copenhagen Plant Science Centre	
Jens Stougaard, Professor at Aarhus University	











From Estonia:	
Mati Koppel, Director Estonian Crop Research Institute	
Ülle Jaakma, Vice-Rector of Research, Estonian University of Life Sciences Ülo Niinemets, Chair of Crop Science and Plant Biology, Estonian University of Life Sciences	
Erkki Truve, Programme Director Chemistry and Gene Technology, Tallinn University of Technology	
Hannes Kollist, Professor at the University of Tartu	



From Finland:

<p>Kirsi-Marja Oksman, Research Manager VTT Antti Vasara, CEO and President VTT</p>	
<p>Jari Niemelä, Rector University of Helsinki</p>	
<p>Johanna Buchert, President and CEO of Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke)</p>	
<p>Kalervo Väänänen, Rector at the University of Turku</p>	

<p>From France:</p>	
<p>Pascal Genschik, Director of Research CNRS – IBMP</p>	
<p>Martin Crespi, Director IPS2 and member SPS, Saclay Herman Höfte, Director of Researchm INRA, SPS, Saclay Loïc Lepiniec, Group Leader IJPB, Versailles and Head SPS, Saclay</p>	








<p>From Germany:</p>	
<p>Ralph Bock, Managing Director of the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Plant Physiology</p>	
<p>George Coupland, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Plant Breeding Research</p>	

<p>Detlef Weigel, Director Max Planck Institute for Developmental Biology</p>	
<p>Andreas Meyer, Professor at University of Bonn Frank Hochholdinger, Professor at University of Bonn Peter Dörmann, Professor at the University of Bonn Gabriel Schaaf, Professor at the University of Bonn</p>	
<p>Claus Schwechheimer, Chair Plant Systems Biology at TUM München</p>	
<p>Karl-Josef Dietz, President of the German Society of Plant Science</p>	
<p>Pascal Falter-Braun, Director of the Institute of Network Biology at Helmholtz Zentrum München Klaus Mayer, Professor at Helmholtz Zentrum München</p>	
<p>Johannes Herrmann, President of the Germany Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology</p>	
<p>Stefan Schillberg, Member of the Institute Management (acting) at the Fraunhofer Institute for Molecular Biology and Applied Ecology (IME)</p>	
<p>Andreas Weber, Professor at the Cluster of Excellence on Plant Sciences (CEPLAS)</p>	
<p>Andreas Graner, Director at the Leibniz Institute of Plant Genetics and Crop Plant Research (IPK)</p>	
<p>Karin Schumacher, Professor at the Centre for Organismal Studies (COS) Heidelberg Thomas Greb, Professor at the Centre for Organismal Studies (COS) Heidelberg Rüdiger Hell, Professor at the Centre for Organismal Studies (COS) Heidelberg Ingrid Lohmann, Professor at the Centre for Organismal Studies (COS) Heidelberg Jan Lohmann, Professor at the Centre for Organismal Studies (COS) Heidelberg</p>	


Alexis Maizel, Professor at the Centre for Organismal Studies (COS) Heidelberg	
<p>Jörg Kudla, Professor at the Institute of Plant Biology and Biotechnology, University of Münster</p> <p>Antje van Schaewen, Professor at the Institute of Plant Biology and Biotechnology, University of Münster</p> <p>Iris Finkemeier, Professor at the Institute of Plant Biology and Biotechnology, University of Münster</p> <p>Michael Hippler, Professor at the Institute of Plant Biology and Biotechnology, University of Münster</p> <p>Bruno Moerschbache, Professor at the Institute of Plant Biology and Biotechnology, University of Münster</p> <p>Markus Schwarzländer, Professor at the Institute of Plant Biology and Biotechnology, University of Münster</p> <p>Dirk Prüfer, Professor at the Institute of Plant Biology and Biotechnology, University of Münster</p>	
Marja Timmermans, Director of the Center for Plant Molecular Biology, University of Tübingen	

From Hungary:	
Ferenc Nagy, Director General Biological Research Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences	


From Italy:	
Gennaro Ciliberto, President of the Italian Society of Life Sciences (FISV)	
Luca Sebastiani, Director, Institute of Life Sciences, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies	
Marco Perduca, Coordinator Science for Democracy	




<p>Filomena Gallo, Secretary of the Associazione Luca Coscioni</p>	
<p>Marco Marchetti, President Associazione Italiana della Società Scientifiche Agrarie</p>	
<p>Andrea Schubert, President of the Italian Society of Plant Biology (SIBV)</p>	
<p>Alessandro Vitale, Group Leader, Institute of Agricultural Biology and Biotechnology, National Research Council (CNR) of Italy</p>	
<p>Gian Paolo Accotto, Director of the CNR Institute for Sustainable Plant Protection</p>	
<p>Mario Pezzotti, President of the Italian Society of Agricultural Genetics (SIGA)</p>	
<p>Roberto Tuberosa, Italian Technology Platform "Plants for the future"</p>	

From Lithuania:

<p>Gintaras Brazauskas, Director of the Lithuanian Research Centre for Agriculture and Forestry</p>	
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<p>From the Netherlands:</p>	
<p>Sjef Smeekens, Professor at Utrecht University Rens Voesenek, Professor at Utrecht University Corné Pietrese, Professor at Utrecht University George Kowalchuk, Professor at Utrecht University Ronald Pirsik, Professor at Utrecht University Guido van den Ackerveken, Professor at Utrecht University</p>	

<p>From Poland:</p>	
<p>Marta Koblowska, Faculty of Biology, University of Warsaw Andrzej Jerzmanowski, Professor at Warsaw University</p>	
<p>Jacek Hennig, Professor at the Institute of Biochemistry and Biophysics, Polish Academy of Sciences</p>	



<p>From Portugal:</p>	
<p>Elena Baena-González, Instituto Gulbenkian de Ciência Paula Duque, Instituto Gulbenkian de Ciência</p>	
<p>Margarida Oliveira, Professor ITQB, Lisboa</p>	
<p>Rui Malhó, Professor at the University of Lisboa</p>	





<p>From Romania:</p>

<p>Antonia Ivascu, Executive Director of the Romanian Seed Industry Alliance (AISR)</p>	
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<p>From Spain:</p>	
<p>Pablo Vera, Research Professor CSIC, Director IBMCP Vicente Pallàs, Research Professor CSIC, IBMCP; President of the Spanish Society for Phytopathology José Pío Beltran, Professor at CSIC, Institute for Plant Cell and Molecular Biology (UPV-CSIC)</p>	
<p>José Luis García, Director of the Institute for Integrative Systems Biology I2SysBio (University of Valencia-CSIC) Juli Pereto, Vice-Director of the the Institute for Integrative Systems Biology I2SysBio (University of Valencia-CSIC)</p>	
<p>Fernando Rojo, Director National Center of Biotechnology (CNB)</p>	
<p>José Luis Riechmann, Director Centre for Research in Agricultural Genomics Josep Casacuberta, CSIC Associate Professor Centre for Research in Agricultural Genomics Pere Puigdomènech, CSIC Research Professor</p>	
<p>Juan Carlos del Pozo, Deputy Director of the CBGP (Centro de Biotecnología y Genómica de Plantas)</p>	
<p>Paul Christou, ICREA Professor, University of Lleida-Agrotecnio Center, Lleida</p>	
<p>Rosa Maria Cusido Vidal, Professor at the University of Barcelona</p>	
<p>Francisco Juan Martinez Mojica, Professor at the University of Alicante</p>	

Jordi García-Mas, Scientific Director IRTA (Centre de Recerca en Agrigenòmica CSIC-IRTA-UAB-UB)	
Francisco Javier Cejudo, Director IBVF (Instituto de Bioquímica Vegetal y Fotosíntesis) Sevilla	

From Slovakia:	
Eva Čellárová, Head of the Department of Genetics Pavol Jozef Šafárik, University in Košice, Faculty of Scienc	
Anna Bérešová, Director at the Plant Science and Biodiversity Center, Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAS)	

From Sweden:	
Ove Nilsson, Director Umea Plant Science Centre	
Panagiotis Moschou, Professor at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU)	
Erik Alexandersson, Director of PlantLink	
Eva Sundberg, Chairperson at the Linnean Centre of Plant Biology in Uppsala	

From UK:	
Achim Dobermann, Director Rothamsted Research	
Dale Sanders, Director John Innes Centre	
David Baulcombe, Professor at University of Cambridge	
Jane Langdale, Professor at University of Oxford	
Julian Ma, Director, Institute for Infection and Immunity St. George's Hospital Medical School	 
Nicholas J. Talbot, Executive Director of the Sainsbury Laboratory (Norwich) Jonathan Jones, Group Leader at the Sainsbury Laboratory (Norwich)	

From Europe	
<p>EU-Life:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Austria: Research Center for Molecular Medicine of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (Ce-M-M) - Belgium: Flanders Institute for Biotechnology (VIB) - Czech Republic: Central European Institute of Technology (CEITEC) - Denmark: Biotech Research and Innovation Centre (BRIC) - Finland: Institute for Molecular Medicine Finland (FIMM) - France: Institute Curie 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Germany: Max Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine in the Hemholtz Association - Italy: European Institute of Oncology (IEO) - Portugal: Gulbankian Institute for Science (IGC) - Spain: Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG) - Switzerland: Friedrich Miescher Institute for Biomedical Research (FMI) - The Netherlands: The Netherlands Cancer Institute - UK: Babraham Institute 	
<p><i>FESPB is an umbrella organization for the European Societies of Plant Biology that encompasses 5000 plant scientists.</i></p> <p>Andrea Schubert, President of the Federation of European Societies of Plant Biology (FESPB)</p> <p>Christine Foyer, Secretary General of the Federation of European Societies of Plant Biology (FESPB)</p>	