

PRESS RELEASE

ORGANIC MOVEMENT RAISES RED FLAG ON ASSUMED BENEFITS DEREGULATING NEW GENOMIC TECHNIQUES

BRUSSELS, 29 APRIL 2021 – The organic food and farming movement criticises the Commission’s plan to work on a new legal framework for plants derived from ‘New Genomic Techniques’. In a report published today, the EU Commission revealed they are ready to explore options for a new legal framework if Member States give their green light.

The organic sector calls on agriculture and environment ministers as well as the EU Commission to safeguard the capability of producers and farmers to produce without GMOs and allow consumers to choose what they eat. The existing regulation is fit to achieve these goals and already allows research on and marketing of GMOs if the applicable rules are respected.

Jan Plagge, IFOAM Organics Europe President said: “A weakening of the rules on the use of genetic engineering in agriculture and food is worrying news and could leave organic food systems unprotected – including their ability to trace GMOs throughout the food chain to avoid contaminations that lead to economic losses and to live up to organic quality standards and consumer expectations. Organic producers urge the Commission and Member States to maintain the existing regulatory framework and seriously consider the impact of the proposed regulatory scenario on organic food & farming, consumer choice and access to agrobiodiversity.”

According to IFOAM Organics Europe, transparency on the use of genetic modification should continue to apply all along the food production chain. Contrary to the study’s outcomes, weakening the regulation of these technologies would actually contradict the objectives of the EU Green Deal and the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, as well as the European Court of Justice ruling which states that this new generation of genetically modified organisms must be regulated under the EU’s existing GMO laws [i]”.

“It is baffling that the Commission envisages to jeopardize the development of existing agronomic solutions put forward in its own Farm to Fork strategy to make room in agriculture and food production for genetic modification technologies with at track record of unfulfilled promises”, said Eric Gall, Policy Manager at IFOAM Organics Europe. He continued that “It would be irresponsible for Member States to throw years of policy-making out the window to ensure transparency and traceability on the use of GMOs on the basis of a Commission study purely based on assumptions on the ‘potential benefits to society’ of new genetic engineering technologies and their contribution to the Farm to Fork strategy’s objectives.”

Promises of producers to use the technology to create alternatives to pesticide-tolerant crops should be treated with caution, as is shown by the fact that the first [application](#) in the EU for approval of a CRISPR/Cas plant is a herbicide-resistant maize [ii]. Furthermore, mere promises of expected benefits do not justify a weakening of the EU’s standards with regard to environmental protection and farmers’ and consumers’ choice. Safety checks for new genetic engineering techniques are essential, as a proper risk assessment is necessary to assess the potential risk to health and the environment of a particular genome-edited crop on a case-by-case basis.

Rather than depending on and hoping for silver bullet solutions such as GM crops, the Commission's focus should be on upscaling concrete and well-defined agroecological practices with proven benefits for biodiversity and soil quality. Organic farming is already implementing a wide range of practices to make our food and farming systems more resilient to pests and diverse environmental conditions, as well as extreme weather events linked to climate change while reducing the dependency on synthetic pesticides.

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IFOAM Organics Europe represents more than 200 member organisations in the EU-27, the EU accession countries and EFTA. Member organisations span the entire organic food chain and beyond: from farmers and processors organisations, retailers, certifiers, consultants, traders, and researchers to environmental and consumer advocacy bodies.

[i] According to the European Council (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019D1904&from=EN>), new genomic techniques [new mutagenesis techniques] must be defined in the light of the ECJ ruling in case C-528/16. They therefore include all genetic modification techniques “which appeared or were mostly developed since Directive 2001/18 was adopted” (para 51 of the Ruling of the European Court of Justice, 25 July 2018, Case C 528/16, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=204387&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=req&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=709582>).

The ECJ ruling states that “the risks linked to the use of those new techniques/methods of mutagenesis might prove to be similar to those which result from the production and release of a GMO through transgenesis. It thus follows from the material before the Court, first, that the direct modification of the genetic material of an organism through mutagenesis makes it possible to obtain the same effects as the introduction of a foreign gene into that organism and, secondly, that the development of those new techniques/methods makes it possible to produce genetically modified varieties at a rate and in quantities quite unlike those resulting from the application of conventional methods of random mutagenesis.” (para. 48 of ECJ ruling quoted in note [i])

[ii] <https://www.testbiotech.org/content/application-authorisation-maize-dp915635-pioneer>

