Press Release

Science Policy Symposium: EU research project GeneBEcon confirms consumer openness to NGT products and the need for a proportionate legal framework

24 October 2024

GeneBEcon, a Horizon Europe-funded project, investigates the innovation potential of genome editing to enable a sustainable bioeconomy in Europe. In the context of their annual project meeting, the project partners were given the opportunity to organise a symposium at the residence of the Swiss Embassy in Berlin to present the scientific results from the project to a wide audience.

By applying new genomic techniques (NGT) to potatoes and microalgae, GeneBEcon intends to promote energy-efficient, resource-efficient and improved agricultural production and industrial processing for a sustainable bioeconomy. Professor Detlef Bartsch from the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (BVL) and partner in GeneBEcon explained in his contribution that the project provides sound data for the safe use of new genomic techniques in plant breeding.

Professor Kai Purnhagen, Professor of Food Law at the University of Bayreuth, explained the current state of political discussions on the EU regulatory proposal on NGTs and emphasized that a reform of the legal situation is not a question of "if", but only of how. *“When we think about how, we should be guided by the reality and innovative capacity of the EU.*"

Katharina Unkel, BVL, summarised the project results on the biosafety data and emphasised that the excessive retrieval of experimental and cost-intensive data does not necessarily lead to an increased safety standard of the products. It follows from this that the amount of data used to assess the risk of NGT plants should be proportionate to their hazard potential.

Professor Justus Wesseler from Wageningen University presented the socio-economic results, which confirm that the approval of new genomic techniques needs to be reformed. NGTs make it possible to better prepare agriculture in Europe for the challenges posed by climate change. They make a significant contribution to achieving the goals of the farm-to-fork strategy. "*Without a reform of the regulatory framework, this will not be possible."*

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The results of a consumer survey conducted as part of the project in 4 EU countries plus the UK show that up to 50% of consumers in Europe are willing to buy products produced with the help of new NGT. "*The willingness to pay for yoghurt produced with the help of NGTs is higher than for yoghurt produced with the help of transgenic plants*," reports Wesseler.

Together with various representatives from science and stakeholders, the project partners then discussed the results of the project.

Professor Jens Boch, a scientific user of NGTs, emphasizes that plants bred with new genomic techniques (NGT) have a comparable risk profile to classically bred plants and should therefore be regulated in a comparable way. "*The new genomic techniques offer an excellent opportunity to breed crops cleanly and precisely*," Boch emphasizes.

With the Swiss association "Varieties for Tomorrow", Gabi Buchwalder is committed to strong plant breeding and openness to new breeding methods in the field of molecular biology. Its members include the three largest retailers in Switzerland, as well as farmers' and other agricultural associations and a small consumer organisation. "*I think it is time to finally end the old trench warfare around genetic engineering," said Buchwalder*. "*Large parts of the agriculture and food industry see opportunities in the NGTs. Now it is important to represent this position publicly - as the association "Varieties for Tomorrow" does in Switzerland*."

Stephan Schleissing, head of the program area "Ethics in Technology and Natural Sciences" at LMU Munich, concluded: *"The EU Commission has presented a regulatory proposal that requires concessions from all sides and must therefore be seen as an attempt to reach a fair compromise."*

GeneBEcon - Capturing the potential of Gene editing for a sustainable BioEconomy

GeneBEcon is an ambitious Horizon Europe-funded project that examines the innovation potential of gene editing in enabling a sustainable bioeconomy in Europe. Through the application of this technology in potato and microalgae, GeneBEcon intends to promote energy-efficient, low-input, and zero-pollution agricultural production and clean industrial processing. GeneBEcon started on 1 September 2022 and includes a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder consortium, including leading scientists from 11 European countries.

Partners:

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden – Project Coordinator	EV ILVO, Belgium
XPRO Consulting Limited, Cyprus	Plants for the Future ETP, Belgium
SolEdits AB, Sweden	Wageningen University, the Netherlands
Latvijas Universitate, Latvia	BVL, Germany
FN3PT/inov3PT, France	Universität Bayreuth, Germany
INRAE, France	Sociedade Portuguesa de Inovação, Portugal
Euroseeds, Belgium	HZPC Research BV, the Netherlands
Danish Technological Institute, Denmark	INVE Belgie, Belgium
	Associated Partner:

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