

GLOBAL RESISTANCE TO GENETIC EXTINCTION TECHNOLOGY

Besides constantly exposing the dangers of releasing the untested technology of Gene Editing and Gene Drives in the environment, as well as the lack of transparency in the decision process¹, independent scientists, indigenous peoples, and civil society movements across the world have constantly been carrying out actions of resistance.

In December 2016, over 160 civil society organisations from six continents called for a “Moratorium on New Genetic Extinction Technology” at the 2016 UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Cancun, Mexico². This moratorium call included both lab research and field trials, because of the potentially devastating effects that synthetic biology can have on entire ecosystems³.

Even though the moratorium found support among some countries, the final agreement merely urged caution in field-testing the products of synthetic biology, including gene drives, while supporting better risk-assessment of the products’ potential effects⁴.

There has been no lack of attempts by the industry, through a Gates-funded lobby firm, to manipulate the UN decision-making process over gene drives, as emerged from a set of documents, released in December 2017, revealing how external actors with interest in the development of gene drives coordinated among themselves to influence the work of the relevant UN expert group⁵.

In July 2018, The European Court of Justice ruled that organisms obtained by mutagenesis plant breeding techniques are GMOs and should fall under the GMO Directive⁶.

The court ruling was seen as a victory for environmentalists while the agrifood industry and farmers organisations started a lobbying campaign to roll-back the ECJ ruling in favor of a new EU legislation⁷.

Independent scientists publicly demanded precaution⁸, stating that gene-edited products must be strictly regulated with full recognition of the uncertainties of the gene-

¹ “Gene Drive Extinction Technology Is a War against the Planet and Biodiversity.” *Navdanya International*, December 7, 2017. <https://navdanyainternational.org/gene-drive-extinction-technology/>

² “160 Global Groups Call for Moratorium on New Genetic Extinction Technology at UN Convention.” *SynBioWatch*, December 5, 2016. <http://www.synbiowatch.org/2016/12/160-global-groups-call-for-moratorium-on-new-genetic-extinction-technology-at-un-convention/>

³ “Call for a Global Moratorium on Gene Drives.” *SynBioWatch*. <http://www.synbiowatch.org/gene-drives/gene-drives-moratorium/>

⁴ “ENB Report | CBD COP 13 | 2-18 December 2016 | Cancún, MX | IISD Reporting Services.” <http://enb.iisd.org/vol09/enb09678e.html>

⁵ “Gene Drive Files Reveal Covert Lobbying Tactics to Influence UN Expert Group .” *Corporate Europe Observatory*, December 3, 2017. <https://corporateeurope.org/en/food-and-agriculture/2017/12/gene-drive-files-reveal-covert-lobbying-tactics-influence-un-expert>

⁶ Court of Justice of the European Union, PRESS RELEASE No111/18, Luxembourg, 25 July 2018, Judgment in Case C-528/16, <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2018-07/cp180111en.pdf>

⁷ Antoniou, Michael. “The EU Must Not De-Regulate Gene-Edited Crops and Foods.” *Www.Euractiv.Com*, July 9, 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/opinion/the-eu-must-not-de-regulate-gene-edited-crops-and-foods/>

⁸ ENSSER Statement on New Genetic Modification Techniques: Products of new genetic modification techniques should be strictly regulated as GMOs, European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility, 27 September 2017, <https://ensser.org/publications/ngmt-statement/>

editing process – and that they must be labelled to enable farmer and consumer choice⁹.

In October 2018, in view of the 2018 CBD Conference of the Parties (COP), a broad alliance of indigenous peoples and civil society organizations published a “Call to Protect Food Systems from Genetic Extinction Technology”¹⁰. All the while, a coalition of European movements called upon the European Commission to support an international moratorium on the release of organisms modified by gene drive technology into the environment¹¹.

The global decision passed at the 2018 CBD COP, did not issue any moratorium, but set further barriers to the release of gene drives, by reinforcing as a priority the need to seek free, prior and informed consent or approval from all potentially impacted communities and Indigenous Peoples before even considering environmental release of gene drive organisms¹².

Along the same lines, in 2020, a similar coalition of European movements has requested that the EU Commission fully supports the EU Parliament's call for a global moratorium on the release of Gene Drive Organisms, in view of the EU preparation for the upcoming Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (COP-MOP10)¹³.

In the UK, Beyond GM, GM Freeze and GM Watch started a mobilization campaign¹⁴ in July 2020, in response to a proposed amendment¹⁵ to the Agriculture Bill, that would give the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (currently George Eustice) the power to change the definition of a genetically modified organism (GMO) and re-classify many forms of genome editing as non-GM. Meaning that gene-editing / genetic modification techniques would no longer be regulated and could be used on farms and in food without public knowledge or consent.

In its last meeting before the summer recess, the House of Lords finally withdrew the amendment but only after the government renewed its commitment to push, promote and facilitate the wide use of genome editing in the future of UK farming and food¹⁶.

⁹ Eckerstorfer, M. F., Dolezel, M., Heissenberger, A., Miklau, M., Reichenbecher, W., Steinbrecher, R. A., & Waßmann, F. (2019). An EU Perspective on Biosafety Considerations For Plants Developed by Genome Editing and Other New Genetic Modification Techniques (nGMs). *Frontiers in Bioengineering and Biotechnology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fbioe.2019.00031>

¹⁰ A Call to Protect Food Systems from Genetic Extinction Technology: The Global Food and Agriculture Movement Says NO to Release of Gene Drives, ETC Group, https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/call_to_protect_food_systems_oct_17th.pdf

¹¹ “Open Letter to EU Commission to Support International Moratorium on Gene Drives.” *Navdanya International*, October 26, 2018. <https://navdanyainternational.org/gene-drives-morat-eu/>

¹² “A Human Rights Analysis of Gene Drives.” *FIAN International*, November 14, 2018. <http://fian.org/en/publication/article/a-human-rights-analysis-of-gene-drives-2327>

¹³ “Open Letter: We Need a Global Moratorium on the Release of Gene Drive Organisms.” *Friends of the Earth Europe*, June 30, 2020. <http://www.foeeurope.org/global-moratorium-release-gene-drive-organisms>

¹⁴ Citizen Action: <https://www.gmfreeze.org/current-actions/ask-ministers-to-reject-plans-to-deregulate-genome-editing/>

Action briefing: <https://www.gmfreeze.org/publications/action-briefing-on-agriculture-bill-amendment-to-de-regulate-genome-editing/>

Political briefing: https://beyond-gm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Genome-Editing_Ag-Bill_Political-Briefing_030720-FINAL_updated.pdf

¹⁵ Amendment number 275 to Agriculture HL Bill (2019-21) 112 (i). [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/58-01/112/5801112\(i\).pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/58-01/112/5801112(i).pdf)

¹⁶ “GE Deregulation Amendment Is Withdrawn – but There Is More Work to Do.” *Beyond GM*. Last modified July 29, 2020. <https://beyond-gm.org/ge-deregulation-amendment-is-withdrawn-but-there-is-more-work-to-do/>