
TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHOICE IN THE USE OF GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES

A CITIZENS' CHARTER

A Charter for citizens, civil society, farmers, researchers and others calling for democratic oversight, accountability, transparency and precaution in the use of genetic engineering technologies across agriculture, food and the environment.

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PREAMBLE

The UK Government is rapidly dismantling long-standing safeguards governing genetically modified organisms (GMOs), including gene-edited and so-called “precision bred” organisms. What is framed as technical reform in fact represents a fundamental shift in how genetic technologies are regulated across food, farming and the environment.

Through changes in law and policy, the definition of a genetically modified organism is being redefined to exempt entire categories of GMOs from established safety, transparency and oversight requirements. This has enabled a regulatory model based largely on developer self-certification, with limited independent scrutiny and minimal public visibility.

The consequences are profound. In food and farming, fast-track regulation has been introduced removing labelling and traceability, undermining consumers' ability to make informed choices and farmers' ability to avoid contamination and economic harm. In the environment, unregulated and effectively hidden releases of ‘precision bred’ GMOs are increasing, with risks to biodiversity, ecosystems and future accountability. This approach is already expanding beyond crops and food and is set to extend further to animals, microbes and wider environmental uses.

These changes are significant and meaningful. They mark a decisive move away from precautionary, evidence-based regulation towards a light-touch model driven primarily by political and commercial priorities. They weaken independent oversight, liability and monitoring and erode internationally recognised rights, including the right to information, the right to choose and the right to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect people and the environment.

We recognise that innovation has a role to play in addressing climate and food-system challenges. But innovation without transparency, independent oversight, ethical responsibility and public consent is irresponsible innovation. This Charter calls for openness, accountability and democratic governance in the use of genetic technologies and sets out the principles that governments and regulators must meet to uphold their duty of care and ensure that technological change serves the public interest.

THE PRINCIPLES

We affirm that any use of any type of genetic engineering technology in agriculture, food or open environments must meet the following principles:

1. Transparency and Accountability

- All applications, trials and commercial uses must be open to public scrutiny through an accessible, regularly updated register.

- All supporting data, including raw research and safety data, must be open to independent review ensuring accountability to the public rather than to private interests.
- All food and feed derived from genetically engineered organisms, including those that are 'precision bred', must be clearly labelled.
- A system of ongoing monitoring and the ability to withdraw harmful organisms swiftly must be in place.

2. Independent Science and Oversight

- Risk assessments must be conducted by independent evaluators, free from commercial or institutional conflicts of interest and must be demonstrably precautionary, reflecting scientific uncertainty rather than assuming safety.
- Regulation should require long-term health and environmental studies.
- Scientific and regulatory decisions must prioritise protection of public health and ecosystems over market convenience.
- Experimental trials outside closed environments must be subject to prior safety review and public consultation.

3. Democratic Participation

- Citizens must be able to participate meaningfully in decisions about technologies that affect them.
- Public engagement must go beyond token consultation to include farmers, ethicists, consumers and communities.
- Government must honour its Aarhus Convention obligations: access to information, participation and access to justice.

4. Support for Alternatives

- Regulation and mandatory and voluntary codes of practice with legal liability must be established to enable diverse systems to coexist in an equitable and transparent way.
- Organic, non-GMO and agroecological systems must be protected from contamination and market distortion.
- Equal or greater public investment should support alternatives that enhance soil health, biodiversity, resilience and food security without genetic engineering.

5. Ethical and Cultural Responsibility

- Technology, funding and policy must recognise that genetic engineering raises profound ethical questions about our relationship with nature and the moral limits of intervention.
- Regulation must respect the intrinsic value of life, acknowledge diverse cultural and spiritual perspectives and ensure that benefits serve the common good.

6. Fairness, Equity and Public Benefit

- Intellectual property arising from publicly funded research should remain in public ownership.
- The patent status of all genetically modified organisms, including those that are 'precision bred', must be clearly disclosed in the relevant public databases and registers.
- Technology deployment must not compromise food sovereignty, seed diversity, or farmers' rights to save and exchange seed.
- Technological benefits must be shared equitably, ensuring small and medium-sized farmers are not disadvantaged and that no single sector gains undue power.

OUR COMMITMENT

Until these principles are established, we do not accept the deregulation or introduction of genetic technologies in food, farming and the wider environment.

We believe that governments and regulators have a duty of care to protect people, animals and the environment from unnecessary risk.

We therefore declare that any research, field trial or commercialisation of genetically engineered organisms, including those that are 'precision bred', that does not meet these principles fails to meet that duty.

We further believe that the responsible implementation of rights and responsibilities across all technological approaches to food and farming and ecological management is essential.

We therefore call for immediate action to restore transparency, strengthen oversight and safeguard the rights of citizens, farmers and consumers to know, to choose and to be protected.

This Charter is not a rejection of science. It is a call for science with ethics, precaution and responsibility; innovation with accountability; and progress with public trust. We believe the UK could and should lead globally in responsible biotechnology governance grounded in transparency, democratic participation and respect for diverse farming systems.

We call on the government to restore precaution as the foundation of policy, to ensure independent oversight and to guarantee that all genetic technologies in farming and the environment can only proceed within transparent, democratically accountable and ethically robust frameworks.