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The future of food: will Defra embrace GMOs post-Brexit?

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With timeframes beginning to take shape for the Agriculture Bill and Environment Act, Michael Gove is presented with a number of exciting opportunities for supporting and developing the agricultural sector and rural economy post-Brexit. Although leaving the EU raises certain challenges for the sector, opportunities for a forward looking and open-minded minister are presenting themselves, especially for the future of agri-tech and crop science.

Currently, the future of crop science is being stymied by the logistical quirks of EU membership. Back in 2015, the EU introduced amendments to Directive 2001/18/EC on the deliberate release into the environment of genetically modified organisms that granted member states the authority to “opt out” of, or effectively ban, licencing of Genetically Modified Organisms without having to provide scientific evidence to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). The opportunity to do so was seized upon by many, including in Wales and Scotland.

This amendment was criticised as a short-sighted limitation on trade and innovation, even within the European bloc, effectively restricting the transport and sale of genetically modified produce within the Customs Union, which had essentially enacted a de facto ban on safe products.

Around 50 GMO crops have been authorised by the EU to date. However, wrangling and politics within

the European Parliament have meant that many GMOs proven to be safe are still tied up in the pipeline.

Leaving the EU therefore presents opportunities for the UK to explore streamlined licencing of these hitherto tied up products, and even consider the integration of GMOs at home. Currently, England doesn't grow any GM produce domestically, although we do import GM maize, soya, and much of our animal feed from GM backgrounds.

The most promising crops suitable for introducing to England would be Roundup Ready GA21 glyphosate tolerant crops, which synergises well with herbicides already widely used in the UK. Empowering farmers to use the cutting-edge crop science innovations that are available is certainly one opportunity presented by shifting the responsibility for licencing domestically post-Brexit. Although the blanket spraying of herbicides like Roundup present challenges regarding their impact on the environment and animals, the more obvious solution would be to regulate the technique, not the actual product because it would make that possible.

Creating a positive environment for developing crop science and agri-tech goes hand in hand with giving farmers access to innovative products. Genetic research in the UK has made incredible advances in developing animals genetically resistant to diseases and pathogens. A well-regulated, forward thinking Department that would assist in bringing these products to market present the possibilities for having livestock and poultry resistant to disease - a tremendous opportunity for farmers, whose livestock are threatened and devastated by disease outbreaks or containment policies that go alongside them.

English frameworks for GM licencing require risk assessments and evidence to be obtained, which is compliant with Regulation (EC) No. 1829/2003 on genetically modified food and feed. DEFRA is the responsible body for overseeing the release of GM food, and while it is highly unlikely there will be appetite to remove scrutiny and evaluation of GMOs before release, the power to innovate and introduce new developments will lie within the ministerial department. A minister, that doesn't get distracted by the background noise of "Frankenstein food" has the chance to make a lasting and profound impact on the sector.

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