

EU 'reset' could put back Britain's freedom to develop gene-edited crops



Brussels negotiators are demanding that the UK government freeze plans for farmers to plant crops such as vitamin D-enriched tomatoes

Ministers could be forced to scrap plans that would allow farmers to grow new drought and disease-resistant crops as the price of the government's reset with the European Union.

Sir Keir Starmer will next week agree to realign the UK's food safety rules with those of the European Union in return for Brussels easing checks on British food and agricultural produce sold in Europe.

5 However, EU negotiators are demanding that, in return for the deal, the government mothballs landmark legislation that would pave the way for English farmers for the first time to plant crops developed with gene-editing technology. Instead, the UK would have to wait for the European Union to authorise the technology — which critics say could take up to a decade and leave the UK in the “slow lane” of a multibillion-pound industry.

10 The EU has also demanded that the new market-access deal is time-limited — until 2030 — and dependent on Britain continuing to allow European fishing fleets to operate in UK waters.

“We want the two to be linked,” said an official. “To roll over the SPS [food] agreement in future, the UK will have to agree a new fisheries deal.”

15 Ministers were due to begin authorising the development of precision-breeding of plants and animals following the passing last year of the Genetic Technology Act. It would have opened the door for scientists to develop and roll out new crops such as vitamin D-enriched tomatoes and blight-resistant potatoes.

However, the European Commission is preparing to take a tough stance on alignment and enforcement of existing European legislation as part of the reset. A commission analysis found that there were “specific” British regulations that would “require immediate alignment” with changes that would need to be made before any SPS agreement could enter into force.

20 This would include, suggested one official, any regulatory approvals, such as those covered by the Genetic Technology Act, that are not aligned with the EU. The bloc is still divided over legislation on gene-editing.

It could also force the UK to remove from sale of a number of new-generation fungicides, approved by the UK since Brexit, that have not been authorised for use in the EU. These are particularly important to UK cereal farmers because of Britain's warm, damp summer conditions.

25 Senior EU figures are concerned that any deal does not give UK farmers a competitive or technological advantage over their European competitors.

A diplomat added: “Countries are worried about the UK becoming a backdoor into the internal market, especially now with the Trump trade deal, and we will want to close all loopholes. Alignment must be locked down tight.”

30 Professor Mario Caccamo, chief executive of the National Institute of Agricultural Botany, the UK's leading crop science organisation, said: “We are concerned that ministers will be forced to sacrifice these new scientific advances in order to agree a deal with the EU.

“In this country the legislation is already in place and ready to be used. In Europe they are at best two years away, and in the worst-case scenario it could take another decade.”

35 Tom Bradshaw, president of the National Farmers' Union, said farmers wanted an improved trading relationship with the EU but not “at the cost of being able to make our own production choices”.

(547 words)

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