

EU moves toward latest gene techniques in food production to counter climate change, shortages

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European Commissioner for European Green Deal Frans Timmermans speaks during a media conference on threats of climate change and environmental degradation on peace, security, and defense at EU headquarters in Brussels, Wednesday, June 28, 2023. The European Union took a novel step Wednesday, July 5, 2023 to adapt its food production to the new ways of the world, proposing to embrace the latest gene techniques that it hopes will help counter global

challenges like climate change and shortages while still keep nature and consumers safe. Credit: AP Photo/Virginia Mayo File

The European Union took a step Wednesday toward adapting its food production to the new ways of the world: The 27-nation bloc wants to embrace the latest gene techniques it hopes will help safely counter global challenges like climate change and shortages.

For decades, the EU was conservative in allowing the use of genetically modified organisms—which often brought up connotations of Frankenfood rather than improved [crop production](#)—while the United States and others quickly adopted the new bioengineered technologies.

However, the EU's executive commission on Wednesday threw its weight behind so-called new genomic techniques, which seek to change organisms in a much less intrusive way than the GMOs of old, and to allow many to be sold without special labeling.

"In many ways, new genomic techniques can give you the same results as through conventional and [natural selection](#), or through targeted crossbreeding, but with much more speed, precision and efficiency," European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans said.

The new techniques are intended to make plants better able to withstand drought while requiring fewer pesticides and to create products with better color and more consistency that are more attractive to consumers.

Unsurprisingly, large farming companies welcomed the EU's plans and environmentalists mounted opposition. Wednesday's proposal is only the start of a drawn-out process since member nations and the European Parliament must endorse the plans before they can become reality.

The bloc's current GMO legislation dates back to 2001 after the issue divided the EU for a generation. It gave environmentalists the assurance that the EU wouldn't become a free-for-all for multinational agro-corporations to produce GMOs in bulk and sell products to the bloc's 450 million citizens without detailed labeling and warnings.

The EU's main farm lobby, Copa-Cogeca, was jubilant Wednesday. "After more than a decade of postponements, the European Commission has finally presented a proposal," it said in a statement.

Environmentalists are fully alarmed again, fearing that the newest tools still pose too many dangers and must undergo much better testing.

"Whether it's a toy or a face cream, any product on the market needs to be safety tested. Why would there be an exemption for GMOs that end up in our fields or on our plates," said Eva Corral of Greenpeace.

"Biotech companies have long considered these safety procedures an unnecessary bother and it's disappointing to see the commission agree with them."

Timmermans disagreed with that assessment and said his proposal put caution front and center. When it is clear that plants based on new genomic techniques could occur naturally or by conventional breeding, they would be treated like conventional plants, he said. Others would still face the much stricter GMO requirements before they could be introduced.

The European People's Party, the biggest in the EU legislature, has welcomed the plans.

If done right, the proposal will ensure European competitiveness, lower emissions and more food globally, European Parliament member Jessica Polfj rd. said.

"Everybody should be able to support those objectives," she said.

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