

CAP reform: a new chance for biotech innovation in agriculture

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Opinion Plus

Continuing to deny the benefits of GM crops is unfair and counterproductive, argues Pedro Narro Sanchez.



The cultivation of GM crops would bring many benefits, says Europabio | *Photo credit: Fotolia*

The European Commission's recent consultation on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), will kick off a complex and lengthy debate about how the CAP post-2020 should deliver public goods to EU citizens and boost sustainable agriculture.

Whilst the EU model for supporting agriculture and rural development is still valid, the best outcomes can only be achieved by giving more opportunity to technology and innovation.

Agricultural biotechnology, including genetically modified (GM) crops, can improve agricultural productivity, optimise the use of inputs, help farmers mitigate and adapt to climate change, and respond to the legitimate expectations of EU citizens for environmental and consumer benefits.

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But the CAP, and the EU in general, has done nothing – so far – to support GM crop innovation, despite Europe's heavy reliance on imported GM crops.

The CAP needs technology and trade

Over decades of implementation and multiple reforms, there is no doubt that the CAP has contributed to food security. Overall, it has been a successful common EU policy and represents the biggest part of the EU budget.

But EU farmers still rely heavily on direct payments, as they struggle simultaneously to become more market-oriented and environmentally friendly. And the demands placed on farmers are only increasing.

Despite all these challenges, farmers are not being provided with the opportunity to use the latest technologies and tools to meet their many demands, as reflected in the EU's approach towards approving safe GM crops -whether for cultivation or import.

The EU only produces about five per cent of the soybeans needed to feed the EU's livestock, while importing approximately 35 million tonnes of GM soybeans each year to respond to our feed needs.

All EU member states import GM commodities from third countries, but most of them have banned GM cultivation in their territories without scientific reason.

Allowing member states to ban safe biotech products creates the wrong perception among citizens that these products may not be as safe as a conventional ones and discourages farmers from adopting new technologies that could improve profitability and environmental performance.

Is this the right path to foster innovation and sustainability in the EU? Of course not. Despite efforts since the last CAP reform to facilitate the adoption of protein crops by EU farmers, the fact is that even a slightly increased local production still only represents a small fraction compared to imports. The livestock sector in the EU needs imported GM.

As stated several times by Commission officials, it is completely unrealistic to replace GM imports

with non-GM protein production at EU level.

In terms of economic and environmental sustainability, forcing much more cultivation of high protein crops might be less advisable than if each country and continent continues to grow those crops which it grows most [efficiently](#) [9].

If EU farmers were allowed to cultivate GM products as farmers do in other parts of the world, dependency could be somewhat reduced, as the positive experience with GMO soybeans in pre-EU accession Romania shows. But allowing the cultivation of GM crops would also bring other [benefits](#) [10].

A recent EU report published by the [European GMO Socio-Economics Bureau](#) [11] confirms that insect resistant GM maize, as cultivated today in Spain, can result in lower mycotoxin levels, lead to a 10 per cent increase in yield and a better efficiency in input use (e.g. land, water, fertilizers, insecticides, energy, etc.).

A separate [report](#) [12] arrives at similar conclusions. In 2015 alone, at least an additional 9608 hectares of maize crops would have been required to attain the yields reached by the use of the insect resistant Bt maize in areas that were affected by the European corn borer in Spain.

Bt maize cultivation in Spain has also yielded a net fixation of additional carbon of 849,935 t CO₂ eq., which makes up for the emissions associated with 25,004 cars in Spain for a year.

Can any organic product prove the same positive impact on sustainability? Probably not.

Investments in sustainable agriculture needed

The CAP should support the most sustainable ways of production. Farmers should be able to access the best tools available to improve production and optimise the use of inputs. We must not allow Europe to reject innovation at a crucial time when new technologies are needed to improve sustainability.

Unfortunately, the CAP is currently far from reaching its potential to best support EU farmers. Continuing to deny the benefits of GM crops, even in countries that have legally adopted them, is not only unfair, it is clearly counterproductive.

Ignoring science also weakens the EU strategy to boost jobs and growth and seriously undermines the credibility of EU Institutions.

EuropaBio calls on EU decision makers not to turn a blind eye to the importance of agricultural biotechnologies in the upcoming CAP reform discussions.

In the absence of improved dialogue around the benefits of new agricultural technologies, the EU will only suffer from agri-populism and unfounded fear about new technologies, putting at risk the viability of the CAP and the future of the farming community.

EU agriculture cannot afford to miss this chance to get it right.

About the author

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