

GMO regulation exemptions jeopardize food safety and remove public transparency

Summary:

Health Canada's May 18th change to regulatory guidance will exempt many new genetically engineered foods (genetically modified organisms or GMOs) from the *Novel Food Regulations*. This change allows confidential corporate self-regulation of product safety. It will jeopardize human and environmental safety, and result in a profound loss of transparency for Canadians. Health Canada now says it will propose regulatory amendments to reflect the new guidance. Meanwhile, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is proposing similar regulatory exemptions for many gene-edited GM seeds.

Our Key Recommendations:

The Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN) objects to the devolution of responsibility for safety assessment of GMOs from government regulators to product developers.

- » Health Canada and the CFIA should retain regulatory authority over all genetically engineered products, including those produced with gene editing, to ensure safety and transparency: The Departments should continue in their role as independent regulators of genetically engineered products.
- » Health Canada and the CFIA should assess the safety of all genetically engineered foods and plants: The use of genetic engineering, including the new techniques of genome editing, should trigger regulation.

The changes:

On May 18, Health Canada announced changes to regulatory guidance for the safety assessment of genetically engineered (genetically modified or GM) foods. **Many new genetically engineered foods and seeds will now be exempt from the *Novel Food Regulations***, meaning there will be no government safety assessments and no government oversight of those products.

Specifically, many genetically engineered foods that have no foreign DNA (**produced through the new genetic engineering techniques of genome editing, also called gene editing**) will be exempt from the regulations. Health Canada is surrendering its regulatory authority over these new GMOs and handing food safety assessments over to product developers.

On May 18, Health Canada also announced its [intention to propose amendments to the regulations themselves](#), to reflect the guidance.

The CFIA is proposing similar changes that would exempt many gene-edited seeds from government environmental safety assessment.

The changes will allow some unregulated, unreported, genome-edited foods and seeds on the market in Canada.

The core problems with the changes:

The regulatory exemptions are not science-based and will jeopardize safety

The exemptions do not reflect the science, which shows that genome editing can result in a range of possible unintended effects that could have impacts on food and environmental safety. Narrowly focussing on the presence of foreign DNA as a trigger for government safety assessment overlooks many **possible safety issues that could result from unexpected effects caused by the process of genome editing**. For example, unexpected effects could result in alterations to biochemical pathways or protein composition, which could have implications for food and environmental safety. The new regulatory guidance is **not science-based or future-proof** because it assumes the safety of many GMOs that have no foreign DNA, including those produced by genome editing processes that have not yet been developed.

- » [This science is discussed in a report from CBAN and Testbiotech, March 2022](#) (available in English only).

The regulatory exemptions will result in a profound loss of transparency and public trust

Health Canada and the CFIA are proposing to surrender their regulatory authority over many new genetically engineered products. This means that the Departments will **not have the ability to require information from product developers about these unregulated GMOs**, and they may go entirely unreported. Farmers in Canada may not be informed that their seeds are genome edited, consumers will have no information about which GMOs could be sold in stores, and **the federal government will not know all the GMOs that could be on the market or in our environment**. The government will lose the ability to track and trace GMOs, which will hamper the government's ability to respond to any possible safety, environmental, or economic impacts that may arise.

- » [This loss of transparency is detailed in a briefing from CBAN, March 2022](#).

Information on genome editing from CBAN:
www.cban.ca/GenomeEditingReport

Updates and analysis on the proposals from CBAN:
www.cban.ca/NoExemptions

Who opposes the changes:

- » [105 groups](#) wrote together to the Ministers of Health and Agriculture and Agri-Food to ask for transparency and government oversight over all genetically engineered foods and plants.
- » The [National Farmers Union](#) passed a resolution at their 2021 convention opposing the proposals.
- » The [Canadian Organic Trade Association](#) and [La Filière biologique du Québec](#) have asked the public to join them in opposing the changes because they jeopardize the future of organic food and farming.



The **Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN)** brings together 15 groups across Canada to research, monitor and raise awareness about issues relating to genetic engineering in food and farming. CBAN is a project on the shared platform of MakeWay Charitable Society.

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