



Research & Development

New breeding methods: Switzerland should seize opportunities now

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At a glance

- New breeding methods can make plants more resistant to diseases, pests and weather extremes.
- They enable stable harvests with fewer pesticides and fertilizers.
- The restrictive draft law would de facto make the cultivation of native varieties impossible.

In 2020, Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna were awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. In a study, they showed how genes can be specifically modified using the CRISPR/Cas9 system. The method is also known as gene scissors because it can precisely cut out specific sections of a gene strand. In contrast to traditional genetic engineering, no foreign genetic material is usually introduced.

The benefits of new breeding methods

Plants from new breeding methods offer great opportunities for the agriculture and food industry. They can be made more resistant to diseases, pests or unfavorable weather conditions. In view of changing climatic conditions, plants must be able to cope better with heat, drought or large amounts of precipitation. Resistant varieties can reduce crop losses and stabilize or even increase yields. This also has ecological benefits: The use of pesticides and fertilizers can be reduced without yield losses, thus preserving the quality of the soil and water. In addition, undesirable substances such as allergens or toxins can be reduced and valuable ingredients such as vitamins can be increased.

Draft law too restrictive

According to the Federal Constitution, Swiss agriculture should make a significant contribution to the supply and preservation of natural resources. Blocking innovations is contrary to the goals of multifunctional agriculture. Until now, plants from new breeding methods have been subject to the genetic engineering moratorium. Under pressure from Parliament, the Federal Council has presented a draft to independently regulate such plants without foreign genetic material. However, the draft is so restrictive that the cultivation of varieties produced in Switzerland using new breeding methods is virtually impossible.

Other countries do not treat such plants any more strictly than conventionally bred varieties. As the use of new breeding methods can hardly be proven, these varieties will end up on Swiss shelves anyway. However, the question is whether domestic breeders will use innovative methods and whether our producers will be able to grow them commercially. Given the potential of new breeding

methods, it would be naive to prevent this. Unfortunately, this is exactly what would happen with the current draft, which is why improvements are needed.



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