



Press release

Survey: EU citizens reject genetic engineering of wild species with Gene Drives

European “Stop Gene Drives” campaign demands global moratorium

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Should humanity release genetically engineered gene drive organisms into nature? The response of a majority of citizens in eight European countries is: “No, the risks are too high”. This first opinion poll on the subject shows high levels of opposition to (46% - 70%) and very low levels of support for (7% - 16%) the use of Gene Drive technology in the environment. The survey of nearly 9,000 people is representative of 280 million EU citizens from eight EU countries. It was commissioned by nine NGOs demanding an informed and inclusive public debate and a global moratorium on the environmental release of this new type of genetically modified organisms. The survey also reveals that a large proportion of respondents were still undecided (14% - 27%) or did not know how to answer (1% - 24%).

Genetically engineered gene drive organisms are designed to invasively propagate genetic traits throughout wild populations of organisms and thus would allow to quickly genetically alter or eradicate entire species in nature. Proposed applications include exterminating insects (such as mosquitoes transmitting infectious diseases or agricultural pests), controlling invasive species (such as rodents) or eliminating herbicide or pesticide resistance. A strong involvement of military agencies in the research also indicates gene drives’ potential use as weapons.

"Such a powerful technology with potentially irreversible consequences for wild species and all of their ecosystems must be controlled by strict international rules and procedures of decision making. We do not believe that the release of gene drive organisms from the lab into the environment should happen at all. At least, it would require strict international standards of risk and technology assessment and prior inclusive, democratic decision making based on precaution and the prior informed consent of all peoples and states potentially affected," says Mareike Imken from Save Our Seeds, Germany, who coordinates the European “Stop Gene Drives” campaign.

A large majority of respondents (65% - 82%) agrees that environmental releases of gene drive organisms should be postponed until there is scientific proof that their release would not harm biodiversity, human health, agriculture or peace. A similar majority (61% - 85%) agrees that the authorisation of environmental releases of gene drive organisms that could spread globally should require a global consensus.

"Europeans are seriously sceptical about genetically engineering wild species with gene drives. The results of the poll send a clear message to the European Commission: we need global consensus before any one scientist or country is allowed to release gene drive organisms into nature. Launching this now would be madness, because it could change the genetic makeup and features of species forever or drive them into extinction. We need a proper public debate that involves people in the risks of genetically modifying wild populations or entire species before anything happens," says Laura Sullivan, Executive Director of WeMove Europe.

Background:

The European “Stop Gene Drives” campaign, in line with the European Parliament’s resolution from January 2020, calls on the EU Commission and Member States to advocate for a global moratorium on the environmental release of gene drive organisms, including field trials, at the upcoming 15th Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, to be held in Kunming, China in autumn 2021. This call is supported by 78 civil society organisations from across Europe and by over 260,000 EU citizens in an ongoing EU petition. Their demands correspond to those made in a call signed by over 200 organisations globally.

This representative survey was conducted in December 2020 by the international market research institute YouGov and polled 8,826 citizens, from eight EU countries: Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Poland, Denmark, Sweden and Bulgaria. It was commissioned by WeMove Europe, Save Our Seeds (Germany), Skiftet (Sweden), France Nature Environnement (FNE) (France), POLLINIS (France), OGM Dangers (France), Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz (BUND) (Germany), Deutscher Naturschutzring (DNR) (Germany), Umweltinstitut München (Germany), and Za Zemiata (Bulgaria).

Gene drive technology is a method of genetic engineering, enabled by CRISPR/Cas. Gene drives are designed to either alter the genetics of wild populations, such as mosquitos or rats, or to eradicate them completely. The release of gene drive organisms into nature would mean a paradigm shift for European genetic engineering legislation. This legislation stipulates that the outcrossing of genetically modified organisms with wild populations must be prevented. However, gene drives are aimed precisely at such outcrossing and are intended to replace wild populations with genetically modified organisms. This would be tantamount to genetically engineering entire ecosystems. Some scientists are convinced that gene drive technology could help to control diseases, invasive species, or agricultural pests. A research consortium funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is currently planning first environmental field trials in Burkina Faso, with the aim of eradicating malaria transmitting anopheles mosquitoes. Many scientists warn that such environmental releases cannot be recalled or controlled in time and space and might have severe and irreversible effects on ecosystems, biodiversity, human health and agricultural systems. Once released, gene drive organisms may spread and affect ecosystems globally.

Resources for editors:

EU-wide petition for global gene drive moratorium: <https://act.wemove.eu/campaigns/gene-drive-moratorium-INT-EN>

Open letter by 78 european organizations to the EU Commission calling for a global gene drive moratorium: [https://update.zs-intern.de/fileadmin/files/SOS/gene_drive/Open Letter to the EU Commission Please support a global moratorium on the release of Gene Drive Organisms_30.06.2020.pdf](https://update.zs-intern.de/fileadmin/files/SOS/gene_drive/Open_Letter_to_the_EU_Commission_Please_support_a_global_moratorium_on_the_release_of_Gene_Drive_Organisms_30.06.2020.pdf)

Open letter by over 200 organizations worldwide calling for global gene drive moratorium: https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/forcing_the_farm_sign_on_letter_english_web.pdf

Resolution of the European Parliament for a global gene drive moratorium: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0015_EN.html

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