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Gene editing moves from policy to practice in U.K

02 June 2026 | News

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The United Kingdom has taken a significant step in its post-Brexit agricultural innovation strategy with the planting of the countryâ??s first gene-edited crop under the newly implemented precision breeding regulatory framework. The milestone marks the practical commencement of a policy shift designed to accelerate biotechnology-led agricultural research while distinguishing precision-bred organisms from conventional genetically modified crops.

The field trial, led by Rothamsted Research, represents the first crop to be authorised through a Precision Bred Organism Release Notice under the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 and the accompanying Precision Breeding Regulations 2025. Researchers have planted *Camelina sativa*, an emerging oilseed crop, to evaluate whether gene-editing techniques can enhance seed size, oil concentration and overall crop productivity.

The project employs CRISPR-based gene-editing technology and is being positioned primarily as a proof-of-concept for the United Kingdomâ??s new regulatory pathway rather than an immediate route to commercial product development. Scientists believe the trial will help demonstrate how precision breeding can contribute to the creation of more productive and resource-efficient crop varieties.

â??This programme illustrates the potential of gene editing to deliver tangible benefits for British agriculture,â? said Dr Mollie Langdon, who is leading the research initiative at Rothamsted Research.

The Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act represents a fundamental departure from the regulatory framework inherited from the European Union. Under the new legislation, organisms containing genetic changes that could have arisen

naturally or through traditional breeding methods are classified separately from genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

This distinction is intended to simplify research and development processes for precision-bred crops while maintaining regulatory oversight. The newly introduced release notice mechanism significantly streamlines the approval process for outdoor field trials, reducing many of the administrative requirements that historically governed GMO testing.

Industry observers view the development as a pivotal moment for the UKâ??s ambition to establish itself as a global hub for agricultural biotechnology and precision breeding innovation.

In a parallel development that further highlights the growing momentum behind advanced agricultural technologies, Mosaic has announced a Â£2.5 million investment (approximately $3.2 million) in SugaRox, a biotechnology spinout jointly established by Rothamsted Research and the University of Oxford.

The investment will support the development of precision crop biostimulants designed to enhance plant performance and improve crop resilience. The funding aligns with Mosaicâ??s broader strategy to expand its Mosaic Biosciences platform as global crop nutrition companies increasingly diversify into biological and efficiency-enhancing technologies alongside conventional fertiliser products.

The twin developments underscore a broader transformation underway within the agricultural sector, where advances in gene editing, biological inputs and precision technologies are increasingly converging to address productivity, sustainability and climate resilience challenges.

By formally differentiating precision breeding from conventional genetic modification, the United Kingdom is positioning itself among a small group of major agricultural economies seeking to create a more enabling environment for biotechnology innovation. The regulatory clarity is expected to open new opportunities for research institutions, start-ups and agribusinesses exploring gene-editing applications, while potentially accelerating the development of next-generation crop varieties and biological solutions.

As global agriculture faces mounting pressure to improve productivity while reducing environmental impact, the UKâ??s evolving precision breeding ecosystem may serve as an important test case for how regulatory innovation can influence the pace of scientific advancement and commercial adoption in the years ahead.