# Baroness Helene Hayman reflects on two decades of change in UK genetically modified crop policy



Baroness Helene Hayman, a former Minister of State at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) within the Labour Government, has reflected on the evolution of genetically modified (GM) crop policy in the United Kingdom, particularly highlighting a significant shift in regulatory approaches to genetic technology over the past two decades. Her insights, published on geneticliteracyproject.org, recount her experiences during a time when the GM crop debate was highly polarised, and the technology was largely sidelined due to political divisions both within and between parties.

During her tenure in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Baroness Hayman’s ministerial responsibilities encompassed GM issues, allowing her to engage extensively with the scientific community. She recalls encountering pioneering plant scientists whose work suggested transformative benefits of GM crops for agriculture, including increased drought tolerance, pest resistance, enhanced nutritional content, and environmental advantages. Despite the promise shown by innovations such as drought-tolerant wheat and maize, blight-resistant potatoes, and Omega-3-enriched oilseeds—which have since been realised globally in both developed and developing countries—the UK’s political climate led to a decade-long hesitation in embracing these technologies.

In an effort to foster progress, Baroness Hayman joined forces with Lords Cameron of Dillington, Krebs, and Rooker to propose a cross-party amendment during the passage of the Agriculture Act, nearly five years ago. This amendment aimed to facilitate regulatory divergence from the European Union’s more restrictive gene editing regulations, thereby opening avenues for novel precision breeding technologies like CRISPR to benefit British agriculture. Although the amendment was not incorporated into the Agriculture Act due to procedural reasons, it prompted the government to commit to consulting on the issue and developing new primary legislation in this field.

Baroness Hayman welcomed the subsequent enactment of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023, which she describes as a symbol of cross-party support for science-based regulation of genetic innovation. The legislation was introduced by a Conservative Government and its implementation through secondary regulations is now under the oversight of a Labour administration, signifying a notable shift from the divisive debates of the past.

At a recent briefing hosted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Science and Technology in Agriculture, which Baroness Hayman attended alongside Lords John Krebs and Ewen Cameron, international experts lauded the UK’s Precision Breeding Act as one of the most progressive and science-driven frameworks worldwide. The UK regulatory approach consolidates marketing approvals for gene-edited crops within a single legislative framework, contrasting with the more fragmented systems seen in countries like the United States.

The legislation is grounded on extensive scientific evidence asserting that crops produced through precision breeding pose no greater risks to humans or the environment than those bred conventionally. This risk-based, proportionate regulatory approach acknowledges the long-standing safety of conventional plant breeding and treats gene editing as an additional, efficient tool available to plant breeders to introduce desirable traits rapidly—achieving results in a quarter of the time required by traditional methods.

During the APPG briefing, Baroness Hayman shared examples demonstrating how precision breeding is being utilised to increase crop yields, extend shelf life, and reduce food waste through traits such as non-browning in potatoes, mushrooms, and apples, and by enhancing the durability of perishable crops like strawberries and bananas. She noted that reducing food waste is particularly significant, given that over one-third of globally produced food is lost before consumption—a figure the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates could feed two billion people and is a contributor to approximately 8% of total greenhouse gas emissions.

The briefing also highlighted how adopting science-based regulations can democratise innovation, making gene editing accessible beyond large multinationals to start-ups and smaller companies. Citing Argentina’s experience, Baroness Hayman referenced a 2020 study confirming that regulation aligning gene-edited crops with conventionally bred varieties encouraged broader investment, research and development activities, and diversified crop improvements.

In England, since introducing simplified notification procedures for field trials of precision bred plants in March 2022, there have been 23 notified trials, primarily involving public sector institutions, start-ups, and SMEs working on a variety of crops and applications. These trials span improvements in crop performance, harvest efficiency, food safety, nutrition, and environmental sustainability.

Baroness Hayman emphasised that precision breeding should not be viewed as a replacement for conventional breeding but as a complementary tool in the plant breeder’s toolkit. She expressed pride in having been part of the groundwork leading to the current legislation and noted that the cross-party support observed today starkly contrasts with the divisive GMO debates that characterised the previous era.

Baroness Hayman’s reflections underscore a significant transformation in the UK’s approach to genetic technologies in agriculture, providing a framework that balances innovation with evidence-based regulatory oversight, and opening opportunities for advancing sustainable agricultural practices.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2025/04/29/viewpoint-u-k-poised-to-approve-the-precision-breeding-act-reverse-25-years-of-science-rejectionism/> - This article discusses Baroness Helene Hayman's perspectives on the evolution of GM crop policy in the UK and the shift towards more science-based regulation through the Precision Breeding Act, highlighting past political divisions and the current cross-party support for genetic innovation.
2. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmagric/812/0071808.htm> - This House of Commons document touches on the need for regulation regarding GM crops, including tolerance levels for accidental contamination, reflecting some of the challenges faced during Baroness Hayman's tenure.
3. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9557/CBP-9557.pdf> - This PDF outlines the provisions of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023, including proposed regulatory changes that align with Baroness Hayman's narrative of moving towards a more science-driven approach to genetic technology in the UK.
4. <https://www.scienceforsustainableagriculture.com> - This website hosts discussions on sustainable agriculture and genetic innovation, reflecting the broader context of debates around precision breeding and its role in modern agriculture, aligning with themes discussed by Baroness Hayman.
5. <https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/mp/baroness-hayman2/bill/2019-21/agriculture> - This link provides insight into Baroness Hayman’s contributions to agricultural policy debates, particularly her efforts to facilitate regulatory changes that could benefit the adoption of precision breeding technologies in the UK.
6. <https://www.noahwire.com> - Although not specifically about Baroness Hayman or the Precision Breeding Act, this source is mentioned as the original provider of information about her reflections on genetic technology policy evolution in the UK.
7. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMi3wFBVV95cUxPRjc0Y0hjQVQ4dW83QjZINy0wclNSRVItNnhOVVp0azQxXzhTVDVRSkZzQnZvNHYzMXRsSjMxYnRhemJ1blh1SEpvOFZPWS1ZNlc0dlF3dXk2RFpxQktmeThGNEZoVnFnQlU1N3ZpZjhWNWo0WjNXVjJNNWl1bjUxZExZOHdyREk5S3hJMVBiaDNVZ2dhNVZXSER6cGJ0dVVaU0VKUGdtbHY3Mjl4dWhRaWZHOWhXcUJ3NjJiUVY4Q1ctWHZFMnFtbFFpWUE5cW1FRGU2VTh6MUdVQUI5Zjdn?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data