



Brussels  
17, March 2017  
ESA\_17.0194

The European Seed Association (ESA) is the voice of the European seed sector. ESA's members are national associations and individual companies active in research, breeding, production and marketing of seeds of agricultural and ornamental plant species. ESA represents more than 7000 seed businesses in the EU and beyond, including several that breed, produce, and sell seed for organic crop production.

# Statement on

## **IFOAM – Organics International Draft Position Paper: “Compatibility of Breeding Techniques in Organic Systems”**

Europe's plant breeding and seed production companies serve all types of agriculture, non-organic as well as organic, and assure a wide choice for customers (farmers, growers, industry, consumers) by supplying seeds resulting from innovative, diverse breeding and production methods, based on individual markets and economics.

Plant breeding addresses major challenges that all farmers face, like biotic stresses such as pests and diseases. Breeding also responds to abiotic objectives such as drought tolerance and nutrient efficiency. In addition, breeders focus on specific quality aspects, meeting the demands of consumers and food processors. Innovations in plant breeding methods over more than 100 years have made plant breeding ever more effective and efficient, allowing farmers to have reliable crop harvests under changing conditions. Organic growers and farmers currently have access to and benefit from high quality seed developed from a wide range of different breeding methods. It must be emphasized that only few breeding programs are dedicated solely to the organic sector; given the rather small size of the organic sector in general and of some specific organic markets specifically, such exclusive dedication is not economically sustainable. Varieties for organic production therefore commonly derive from the same breeding programmes as their non-organic counterparts. During the long breeding history of any new variety, a huge diversity of genetic resources are combined in the breeding pedigree, each of them resulting from different and innovative breeding methods. This use, of course, always complies with any relevant legislative requirements.

As regards organic production, generally all breeding methods are suitable and, for the European Union, solely the use of GMOs regulated under EU legislation is prohibited. Finally, varieties developed for or specifically suitable for organic production generally are tested under respective organic growing conditions to verify that their performance meets the expectations of farmers and growers in practical production.

The consequent application of IFOAM's draft criteria for variety development for the organic sector would create the need to completely separate breeding programmes for the conventional market on the one hand and the organic market on the other. As stated, this is not economically viable. In most cases, it will thus result in a limitation of investment in organic variety development.

**ESA therefore underlines that a restriction of breeding methods for organic variety development would have significant consequences for all organic farmers and growers. For many crops, there will be less diversity and choice. For some species, even no organic seed will be available anymore.**

ESA acknowledges that next to legislative rules and regulations, private definitions and standards may be developed and used as marketing tools by individual groups of economic operators such as e.g. IFOAM. We also do not question the right of IFOAM to agree and impose on its members limits in the use of specific products or methods beyond those laid down in legislation (e.g. in the EU Organic Farming Regulation) based on individual philosophies, ethical considerations or religious views. But ESA insists that legislation must not be based on such individual considerations but must *per definitionem* set the common, legally binding standard.

The private standards and definitions for “classical/traditional/conventional breeding” and “genetic engineering” as laid down in the IFOAM draft position paper therefore cannot be the basis to put any burden on other stakeholders acting in the agricultural production/breeding chain. This especially concerns:

- A general restriction of rights through the establishment of private standards which limit the freedom to operate of other stakeholders beyond the existing and valid regulatory standards;
- The prohibition or restriction of the use and production of all products being regarded as “GMOs” according to IFOAM’s private standards;
- The liability for “adventitious presence” of plants privately defined by IFOAM as “GMOs” without any legal basis;
- The retroactive establishment of private standards and obligations for products being defined as “GMOs” by IFOAMs private definition but which have been and still are marketed as non-GMOs in line with the applicable legislation.

ESA specifically stresses that transparency and choice require that where deviations from these private standards are allowed, e.g. allowing cultivation of plants derived from breeding methods defined as genetic engineering by the draft IFOAM paper, IFOAM should make these deviations transparent to farmers, producers and consumers to assure proper consumer information. The draft IFOAM paper proposes to “tolerate” the production of plants in organic farming that result from plant breeding methods defined as ‘genetically engineered’ by IFOAM’s private standards. This proposal clearly contradicts the organic sectors’ own request for a “zero tolerance” of genetically modified seeds in conventional and organic agriculture.

Similarly, to achieve legal certainty and avoid potential fraud, ESA is of the opinion that plant varieties produced through the latest breeding methods should not be differentially regulated, if they are similar or indistinguishable from varieties that could have been produced through earlier breeding methods or by nature itself without any human interference.

**Disclaimer: This statement does not intend to comprehensively address all aspects of the IFOAM draft position. It does not preclude further statements on additional aspects of the IFOAM draft position in the future.**

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