

Media Statement  
30 July 2018

## **Gene Drive GMOs Would Need NZ's Neighbours to Agree Any Release**

New Zealand cannot decide to release a “gene drive” GMO on its own without a significant impact on its international relations.

Research into using this new form of genetic engineering to wipe out pests has had a lot of attention, but there has been scant recognition that other affected nations would essentially have to agree to any release.

The key finding of a new study on the governance of gene drives is that the “collective consent” of all countries affected by a gene drive release would be needed. The report by the Sustainability Council was supported by a grant from the New Zealand Law Foundation.

A gene drive can deliver “extinction to order”, and it can target a species in the wild.

New Zealand has a strong interest in being consulted in advance of another country releasing a gene drive to wipe out a species that may be of value to New Zealand farming or ecology. A country that is otherwise vigilant to biosecurity risks should be alive to the ways in which gene drive releases in other countries could prove a significant biosecurity threat. This is why New Zealand should back strong international rules.

If New Zealand wants to explore the use of gene drive to help protect native species, it should be leading development of the international governance. For example, release of a gene drive designed to eliminate possums in New Zealand would raise significant issues for Australia where the species is protected and the Australian Academy of Science believes gene drive releases in other countries would eventually arrive on its shores.

New Zealand needs to fundamentally reappraise gene drive's risks and benefits.

Although gene drives targeting possums, stoats and rats in New Zealand are years away, there is real urgency to reach a global agreement to govern gene drives as research and development around the world are gathering pace. Developers acknowledge that even small-scale field trials pose regional or potentially global risks.

As a first step, New Zealand should establish a constraint period during which no gene drive release would be permitted here until international governance that is fit for purpose is in place. This would also allow New Zealand to introduce a level of protection that is not currently delivered by its domestic regulation, and align that domestic law with an internationally agreed approach to the technology.

At the same time, New Zealand's stance would help build momentum for a similar constraint period to be agreed internationally, and so lay the ground for the governance that is required to meet the challenges gene drive presents.