Genome Editing in Crop Plants: A Safety Perspective

Prashantkumar. S. Hanjagi*, Shubham. S. Nikam, Sushma. M. Awaji, and A. K. Singh
ICAR-National Institute of Abiotic Stress Management, Baramati, Maharashtra, India
Corresponding Author: psh7160@gmail.com

Introduction

In recent years, genome editing has emerged as a transformative tool in plant science, enabling precise modifications in plant DNA to develop climate-resilient, high-yielding, and disease-resistant crops. Technologies such as CRISPR-Cas9, TALENs, and Zinc Finger Nucleases (ZFNs) allow scientists to edit genes with pinpoint accuracy, offering significant advantages over traditional breeding and genetic modification techniques. Unlike genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which involve inserting foreign DNA, genome-edited plants often retain only native genetic material, making them comparable to natural mutations.

Despite these advantages, scientific risk assessment is crucial to ensure that genome-edited plants are safe for human consumption, the environment, and biodiversity. Recognizing this, the Government of India has introduced a progressive regulatory framework to assess and approve genome-edited crops based on the type of genetic modification.

Why is Safety Assessment Important for Genome-Edited Crops?

Although genome editing is a precise and efficient tool, safety concerns must be addressed to prevent unintended consequences. Key areas of assessment include:

1. **Molecular Characterization:** Ensuring that only intended genetic changes occur and no off-target mutations are present.
2. **Food Safety:** Assessing toxicity, allergenicity, and nutritional composition to confirm that the edited plant is safe for consumption.
3. **Environmental Impact:** Evaluating the risk of gene flow to wild relatives, effects on non-target organisms, and overall ecological safety.

India follows a science-based approach to safety assessment, distinguishing between different categories of genome edits to streamline regulatory approvals while maintaining biosafety standards.

India's Regulatory Framework for Genome-Edited Crops

Categories of Genome-Edited Crops

As per the 2022 Guidelines for Safety Assessment of Genome-Edited Plants, genome-edited plants are classified into three categories (Fig 1) based on the type of genetic modification:

1. **SDN-1 (Site-Directed Nuclease-1):** Involves small, precise mutations created without introducing foreign DNA. These are comparable to natural genetic variations or conventional mutagenesis and are exempted from stringent regulations.
2. **SDN-2 (Site-Directed Nuclease-2):** Involves a template-based repair to introduce small changes but without foreign DNA. Like SDN-1, these modifications are exempt from regulation if proven to be free of foreign genetic material.
3. **SDN-3 (Site-Directed Nuclease-3):** Involves inserting foreign DNA at a specific location in the genome, leading to novel traits. SDN-3 genome-edited plants are regulated as GMOs and require detailed risk assessment and field trials before approval.

Exemptions for SDN-1 and SDN-2 Genome-Edited Crops

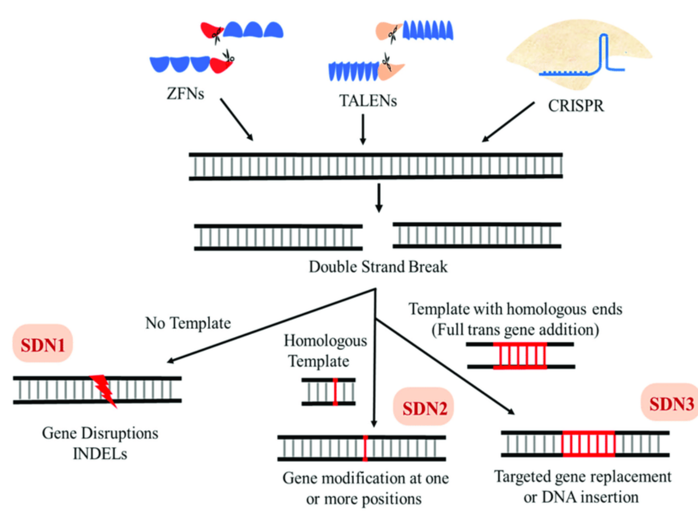

Fig. 1. Genome edited plants categories based on the type of genetic modification

A significant milestone in India's policy came with the March 30, 2022, Office Memorandum from the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF&CC). This document exempted SDN-1 and SDN-2 genome-edited plants from GMO regulations under Rule 20 of the Environment Protection Act, 1986. The exemption applies only if these plants do not contain any foreign DNA.

This policy change aligns India with countries like the USA, Japan, Australia, and Argentina, where similar exemptions have been granted to encourage genome editing research and commercialization.

How Are Genome-Edited Crops Assessed for Safety?

Even though SDN-1 and SDN-2 crops are exempt from GMO regulations, safety assessment is still necessary to ensure their integrity. The Institutional Biosafety Committees (IBSCs) oversee early-stage research, while approvals for environmental release require detailed molecular characterization.

Key Safety Assessment Parameters

Molecular Analysis: Genome sequencing to confirm targeted mutations and absence of off-target effects.

Food Safety Tests: Evaluating allergenic potential, toxicity, and compositional equivalence with conventional crops.

Environmental Impact Studies: Assessing gene flow risks, effects on biodiversity, and ecological interactions.

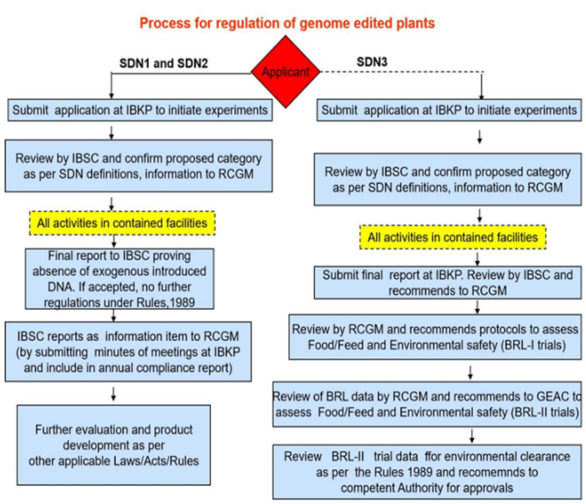

Fig. 2. Process of regulation of genome edited plants in India

Stability Testing: Ensuring that the edited trait is inherited consistently over multiple generations.

For SDN-3 genome-edited plants, additional evaluations include field trials, agronomic performance tests, and regulatory approvals from the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) (Fig. 2).

Scientific Consensus and Global Perspectives

The global scientific community recognizes genome editing as a precise, predictable, and safe technology. Organizations such as WHO, FAO, and OECD have stated that genome-edited crops, when properly assessed, pose no greater risks than conventionally bred plants.

Countries like the United States, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and China have adopted policies that differentiate genome editing from traditional GMOs, streamlining approvals for SDN-1 and SDN-2 crops. India's regulatory approach is in line with these international best practices, ensuring that scientific innovation is not hindered by unnecessary regulatory burdens.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

Despite the policy advancements, several challenges remain in the adoption of genome-edited crops in India:

1. **Public Awareness and Acceptance:** Many people still misconstrue genome editing as GMO technology. Educating farmers, consumers, and policymakers is crucial.
2. **Capacity Building for Safety Assessments:** Expanding research infrastructure for molecular characterization, field trials, and off-target analysis is necessary.
3. **Harmonization with Global Trade Policies:** Ensuring India's genome-editing regulations align with international standards to facilitate export and import of edited crops.
4. **Encouraging Private Sector and Startup Participation:** Streamlining approvals and providing funding for agri-biotech startups will drive innovation. Looking forward, genome editing has immense potential to tackle food security and climate change challenges. Scientists are already working on developing:

- Drought-resistant wheat and heat-tolerant rice to cope with climate change.
- Disease-resistant tomatoes and virus-resistant bananas to reduce pesticide use.
- Nutrient-enriched crops, such as iron-rich rice and vitamin A-enhanced bananas, to combat malnutrition.

Conclusion

Genome editing represents a transformative leap in agricultural biotechnology, offering a safe, precise, and efficient method to improve crops. India's progressive regulatory stance, particularly the exemptions for SDN-1 and SDN-2 genome-edited crops, paves the way for faster approvals and commercialization. However, continued research, transparent safety assessments, and public awareness campaigns are essential to ensure the responsible adoption of this technology. If implemented effectively, genome editing could revolutionize Indian agriculture, enhance food security, and empower farmers by providing them with better, more resilient crops. As India strikes a balance between innovation and safety, the future of genome-edited plants appears promising—not just for farmers and scientists, but for the entire nation striving towards sustainable and resilient food systems.

References

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