

Gene Editing Working Group

22nd March 2023, 2pm on Zoom

Attendees:

Madeleine Campbell, Chair
Rose Jackson, BCVA
Charlotte Commins, BVPA
Dominic Wells, Professor of Translational Medicine, RVC
Richard Piercy, Professor of Comparative Neuromuscular Disease, RVC
Fritha Langford, BVA EWAP
Polly Compston, BVA Policy Committee

BVA:

Amelia Findon – Director of Policy and Governance
Alison Ramsay – Head of Policy and Public Affairs
Hannah Killeen – Policy and Public Affairs Officer

Apologies:

Emily Craven, BVA Policy Committee

Scope and Objectives

1. The Chair introduced the proposed work of the group, setting it in the context of the Genetic Editing (Precision Breeding) Bill which was on the point of receiving Royal Assent in Parliament. It was highlighted that gene editing had a lot of potential benefits, but there were also concerns around the uses the technology could be put to, and the need for regulation. BVA had convened this group to establish a policy position to build on as the sector develops.
2. The initial scope for the group was to look solely at production animals, as this was likely to be the focus of commercial interest and research and development, at least initially. However, it was felt that looking at equine and companion animals would not expand the work of the group significantly, as many of the issues applied equally to all sectors. However, it would mean consulting more widely and potentially expanding the group. It was noted that it would be negligent not to at least horizon-scan for other species, but agreed that livestock was the immediate focus. R Piercy noted that gene editing for companion animals was already being developed in other countries.
3. It was proposed that DNA vaccines for companion animals should be ruled out of scope, and noted that the bulk of the work would be looking at genes passed down by the parent, rather than editing individual animals. There was general support for this view.

Decision: The group agreed to look at all species, consulting equine and companion animal experts as part of the process.

4. There was some discussion of whether lab animals were covered by the new legislation. The group's understanding was that these were covered by ASPA, but that subsequent generations may be released from the lab and it was unclear what the legal position was with regard to these.

Action: Secretariat to check the legal position for lab animals.

Key Principles

5. The group reviewed the draft key principles documents and agreed on the following amendments:

Animal Health and Welfare

- Add “any animals” to ensure future generations are covered
- After “productivity” add “performance, anatomy or physiology of an animal” to reflect that the group was now looking at equine and companion animals.
- Add something to the section about the potential benefits to health and welfare
- Add a paragraph on ethics.

Commented [AR(1)]: What was agreed? This sounds a bit vague.

Safety

- Rename this section ‘Public Health’ for clarity
- Remove the specific reference to parasites
- Move the line on beneficial effect on animals health and welfare to the AHW section

Sustainability

- Add a positive caveat around promoting sustainable agriculture (through reduced inputs, reduction in methane emissions etc)
- Add detail about one health outcomes e.g. reduction of parasites, species balance, AMR
- Change “farming” to “husbandry” and move this sentence to the AHW section: “unsustainable animal husbandry to the detriment of environments, biodiversity, pollution etc.”

Emerging Research

- Retitle “Commitment to Ongoing Review of Emerging Research”
- The professions should “be involved in” emerging research.

Commented [AR(2)]: This needs more detail. “Amend line to read”?

6. On the definitions section, it was agreed to add a preamble explaining that for the purposes of this report, the terms would be defined as follows. There was general agreement that the difference between gene editing and genetic modification was a semantic distinction drawn for political reasons. It was agreed that consistency should be maintained with the language of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act, and “gene editing” should refer to a change which does not introduce any exogenous DNA. Therefore “from a different organism or artificial sequence” should be added to the second definition.

Workplan

7. It was agreed to focus the remaining meetings broadly as follows:

May – Benefits and Risks to animal health and welfare

July – Benefits and risks to humans, sustainability, biodiversity, climate change

September - The practical implications of the Act, likely secondary legislation, checks and balances, guidance for vets

November – Non-production Species

Action: Secretariat to set future meeting dates via doodle poll.

