
Gene drive organisms: Warning of risks due to uncontrolled releases

German ministry urged to support a moratorium

12 October 2018 / The German Ministry for the Environment has in response to an open letter sent by several civil society organisations issued a statement very critical of genetically engineered organisms carrying a so-called gene drive. The ministry announced that it will take action on an international level to make sure that the associated risks are fully investigated. This position is especially relevant for an upcoming international conference within the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which will take place in November.

“We very much appreciate this statement issued by the German ministry. We expect the German government to fully support the precautionary principle and take the initiative for a moratorium on gene drive organisms,” says Silvia Bender from Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND). “We should neither allow uncontrolled releases of genetically engineered organisms in the EU nor in other regions of the world. Natural biodiversity has to be protected for future generations.”

There are plans to genetically engineer natural populations such as insects as well as wild species of plants and mammals by using gene drives. In doing so, wild populations might be diminished or replaced by genetically engineered organisms, and targeted species might even be eradicated.

If a gene drive is inserted in the genome, the process of genetic engineering becomes self-organised and will replicate in each generation thereafter. The new genetic information can spread much faster within populations than would otherwise be the case under normal conditions. The proof of principle for such genetic chain reactions has been shown in yeast, mosquitoes, flies and more recently in mammals. Just recently, the EU Council discussed the specific risks that go along with the release of gene drive organisms. At the same time, several scientists, who have themselves been actively involved in the development of gene drives organisms, have repeatedly given warnings about the risks of the uncontrolled spread of these organisms.

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