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OPEN LETTER: SAINSBURY'S FUTURE OF FOOD REPORT AND GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES IN FOOD PRODUCTION

As a non-profit organisation supporting the development and regeneration of human health by natural means, especially through nutrition and lifestyle, we have long appreciated the role played by Sainsbury's in the UK in bringing healthful foods to the market, including animal products with high welfare standards.

However, we wish to alert you to our deep concerns, voiced to us by some of our membership and supporters, over a number of issues raised in your [Future of Food report](#), published to celebrate Sainsbury's 150th anniversary. One of the greatest single concerns is Sainsbury's apparent support for synthetic biology (synbio), referred to in law as "modern biotechnology", notably the genetic alteration of traditional foods or ingredients, and the creation of new 'fake' foods, through the application of gene-editing (GE) technologies.

We believe that Sainsbury's apparent support for unproven synbio technologies, increasingly being justified by the agri-food industry as necessary to feed growing populations, to protect the natural environment or to avert climate change, marks a significant change in Sainsbury's policy and values, as set out in your ['Healthy and Better' policy](#) which seeks to provide consumers with "great value, healthy food that is produced sustainably". If Sainsbury's becomes, as proposed in the Future of Food report, a pioneer in bringing gene-edited, cultured synbio ('fake') foods to market, many traditional Sainsbury's consumers, including those in our own support base, will be unlikely to continue to frequent your stores.

There also appears to be confusion, re-direction or contradiction within your existing and future policies, as delineated in the Future of Food report, especially as far as these relate to your future commitment to agro-ecological or regenerative practices. Such approaches have been shown to be essential to sustainable food production and are central policies of organisations such as [IFOAM Organics International](#), [Regeneration International](#) and the UK's [Soil Association](#). "Agro-ecological" (or related terms) does not appear even once in your Future of Food Report report, and "regenerative" farming is only mentioned on one page, Farming Impossible Environments, near the end of the report (page 24), so appears to have been dropped as a central, future food policy of Sainsbury's. Eating local, as James Wong says in his section on Planet-Friendly Foods (page 6 of the Future of Food report), is completely

"Promoting natural and sustainable healthcare through the use of good science and good law"

at odds with the notion, suggested by Claire Hughes (in the Foreword) of farming in space, or supplying nutrients, not via foods, but via skin patches. Is Sainsbury's going to be playing both sides of the fence, on one hand supporting traditional, soil-building, agro-ecological farming approaches, while also supporting genetic manipulation of foods and a new generation of entirely novel, 'frankenfoods' or nutrients, delivered via the skin or cultivated off-planet?

Current trends in viewing GE food technologies as a panacea to our food, health and environmental woes are deeply disturbing to those of us who have studied our evolutionary relationship with food, and how the vast majority of our growing disease burden is the result of our maladaptation to contemporary diets (including ultra-processed foods) and lifestyles.

Synbio food would be less of an issue if only those foods or ingredients that were demonstrated to safe following thorough safety studies were brought to market. But you will be aware that there has been very strong pressure from UK agri-food industry stakeholders, and the biotechnology companies that are set to gain from the development of GE and other synbio foods, to circumvent such safety testing previously required for all genetically modified foods.

The agri-food and biotechnology sector has been a major driver of the [Genetic Technology \(Precision Breeding\) Bill](#) that was considered not fit for purpose in an [opinion by the Regulatory Products Committee](#) after it was proposed in 2022. The bill has now passed into law, as the [Genetic Technology \(Precision Breeding\) Act 2023](#), following Royal Assent on 23rd March 2023. We are not aware of Sainsbury's position on this Act.

This law creates an entirely new category of human food, namely that based on any "precision bred organism", this being defined as a product of modern biotechnology where *"every feature of its genome that results from the application of modern biotechnology could have resulted from traditional processes, whether or not in conjunction with selection techniques, alone, and...its genome does not contain any feature that results from the application of any artificial modification technique other than modern biotechnology."*

You may or may not be aware that a GE cultured 'dairy' product called [Bored Cow](#) has been released on the US market and has been found to contain 92 compounds unknown to science along with a series of known toxins and allergens not present in naturally produced cow's milk. It is perverse that such a product results from so-called precision fermentation when the output is so imprecise. We recently [publicised concerns over Bored Cow in an article](#) on our [ANH-USA website](#).

The Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act, by virtue of the fact it allows GE technologies to be used on the condition that an *"organism's genome could have resulted from traditional processes [and where] no account is to be taken of its location in the genome"*, is almost guaranteed to result in unknown, unpredictable (imprecise) consequences. This is because gene expression is not only related to traits incorporated within the genome, it is also related to the specific location of those traits in relation to other coding and non-coding regions of the genome. This knowledge has become particularly apparent in [post-genomic research](#) undertaken since the completion of the Human Genome Project.

Our ask

Based on the views proposed in your Future of Food report, and the confusion it has caused among some of your customers and our supporters, we request that Sainsbury's clarifies its position on the three following questions:

1. What is Sainsbury's current and future commitment to agro-ecological and regenerative farming approaches?
2. Is Sainsbury's in support of the UK's [Genetic Technology \(Precision Breeding\) Act 2023](#)?
3. Is Sainsbury's prepared to bring to market, through its stores and online retail channels, human food products derived from genetic technology-based 'precision bred organisms'?

Many thanks for your urgent consideration of the issues raised in this letter, and in particular, your response to the three questions above.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Verkerk', with a horizontal line underneath.

Robert Verkerk PhD
Founder, executive and scientific director, Alliance for Natural Health International

cc. Claire Hughes, Head of Quality and Innovation, Sainsbury's