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New Zealand outpacing Australia in gene technology reform

In a historic shift, New Zealand is on track to lift its nearly 30-year ban on gene technology beyond the laboratory. From the end of 2025, the country is set to allow research and trials involving cutting-edge gene technologies and products including next-generation crops, medicines, and vaccines to proceed.

However, if it aspires to position itself at the forefront of innovation, its track record in regulating agricultural chemicals should serve as a cautionary tale.

The landmark bill was developed and introduced in just 12 months; closely modelled on Australia's own gene technology framework and the recommendations of the Third Review of the Australian Gene Technology Scheme.

Yet, seven years on, those same recommendations remain unimplemented in Australia. It's a stark reminder that Australia, once considered a global pioneer in gene technology, now risks falling significantly behind its international peers.

The regulation of New Zealand's new Gene Technology Bill will fall to the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) to manage potential risks to human health and the environment. However, the EPA's performance in the agricultural chemistry sector raises red flags. The authority has earned a global reputation for inefficiency, plagued by prolonged delays, opaque decision-making, and inconsistent risk assessments.

These delays have already significantly eroded the plant science industry's confidence to invest in the New Zealand market. While urgent reform is needed to remove bureaucratic bottlenecks hindering the commercialisation of agricultural technologies, shifting responsibility for gene technology regulation to the EPA risks undermining the very objectives of these reforms.

To fully seize this opportunity, New Zealand must prioritise sufficient resourcing, scientific expertise, transparent governance, and timely, evidence-driven decision-making. By learning from past regulatory shortcomings and building on Australia's gene technology experience, New Zealand can leapfrog the innovation curve.



How many Australian innovations have drifted offshore while we wait?

Since the Third Gene Technology Review began in July 2017, Australia has watched opportunity slip through its fingers. Three elections and more than 2,800 days later, a modern gene-editing framework remains frozen in time.

Start-ups are launching products overseas, investors are fleeing to jurisdictions with clear, science-based regulation, and universities see returns on taxpayer-funded research evaporate. While policymakers talk up the bioeconomy, innovation is stifled by regulatory paralysis.

The dream of homegrown breakthroughs like drought-tolerant canola, hypoallergenic peanuts and climate-resilient crops that could have been Australian success stories, are instead becoming imports.

How many more discoveries will slip away before we act? It's time to end the stalemate, implement the Third Review, and build a system that supports safe, efficient innovation. Without it, we're not just delaying progress - we're exporting it.