

The BfR "Genome Editing in the Field of Nutrition and Human Health" Consumer Conference starts on 10 August 2019

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The Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) organises a consumer conference in order to establish a differentiated opinion of informed consumers on the application of genome editing, i.e. the novel and already well-established "DNA scissors" in the form of a consumer vote.

The Consumer Conference allows citizens to participate directly in the public debate on a consumer-relevant and publicly controversial topic. The concept of the BfR Consumer Conference is based on the model of so-called consensus conferences originating from Denmark. The BfR successfully employed this model back in 2006 when it hosted the Consumer Conference on Nanotechnology.

In a preliminary study from 2017, the BfR conducted focus group interviews on genome editing. The result: The level of knowledge was low and consumers' need for information was very high. The potential benefits of genome editing were broached less than the potential risks. Since it is crucial to know about the attitudes and level of knowledge of the population to ensure adequate risk communication, the BfR is organising a Consumer Conference on this issue.

The BfR has already published questions and answers to the most frequently asked questions (FAQ) regarding the BfR Consumer Conference on Genome Editing (in German): <https://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/343/die-haeufigsten-fragen-zur-bfr-verbraucherkonferenz-genome-editing-2019-07-15.pdf>

Currently the BfR continues to receive further enquiries and is therefore publishing additional information. This document will be continuously updated.

Taking the BfR Consumer Conference on Nanotechnology as a blueprint

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The results of the Consumer Conference on Nanotechnology are published here (in German):

https://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/350/bfr_verbraucherkonferenz_nanotechnologie.pdf

Further information as background information for the media can be found under the following link (in German):

https://www.bfr.bund.de/de/presseinformation/2006/B/verbraucherkonferenz_nanotechnologie-8551.html

Both reservations and the need for information exist

As early as 2017, the BfR conducted focus group interviews on genome editing as part of a study. The result: Most participants had not yet heard of genome editing, but they assumed more risks than benefits:

https://www.bfr.bund.de/en/press_information/2017/44/risk_perception_of_genome_editing_reservations_and_a_great_demand_for_information-202581.html

Impartial, non-interest-based hosting is essential

In order to ensure an impartial and non-interest-based approach of the participants to the topic, the entire Consumer Conference will be moderated by an external service provider. This will be dealt with by BIOCOM AG, who have many years of experience in conducting public discussions, especially in the field of life sciences. BIOCOM AG has been awarded the contract to organise and carry out the BfR Consumer Conference, for the purposes of the public procurement procedure for the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (BLE).

The BfR does not act as the principal agency in event hosting, discussion and recording the vote. This is an essential premise of the Consumer Conference. The information material used by the participants to familiarise themselves with the subject of genome editing was initially compiled by the BfR's own specialists in biology and communication sciences and then weighted by the external service provider using didactically meaningful criteria. As the third supervisory body, a scientific advisory panel was set up, which consists of experts from technological impact assessment, social research and risk management. Finally, the advisory panel examines the materials with a view to balancing the risk-benefit analysis and the scientific correctness of the explanations and illustrations. After the end of the event, a list detailing the media materials and literature sources used will be published.

A heterogeneous group of participants is required

The format of the Consumer Conference is fundamentally not a survey method which is representative of the population, simply because the commonly used number of participants is between 20 and 25. Nevertheless, in order to accommodate a variety of opinions, brainstorming, societal demands, as well as hopes and fears, participants will be

selected as heterogeneously as possible in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics, including - in particular - age, gender and occupation (e.g. currently seeking work, pensioners / the early retired). Up until the registration deadline on 28 July 2019, 147 citizens have registered. Since several people with similar social demographics were found, the selection was done at random. 22 people were chosen for the BfR “Genome Editing in the Field of Nutrition and Human Health” Consumer Conference. As soon as all of those invited have sent their participation confirmation, the BfR will publish the anonymised survey for the participants’ social demographics.

Participants decide for themselves which experts they will consult

The group will formulate questions on the topic which will then be posed to selected experts following an introduction and discussions. This will happen at the beginning of the three-day final conference (28 - 30 September 2019), before the consumer vote is issued jointly on the second day. The experts are not selected according to whether they are advocates or critics. The selection is made solely on the basis of their technical expertise. The specialist disciplines that may be in demand by the participants were anticipated on the basis of the fourth Genetic Engineering Report of the interdisciplinary working groups of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, which lists the possible problem areas in detail. For each of the designated disciplines, several experts have been recruited, who are available on 28 September 2019, to personally answer consumer questions on an on-call basis. Of course, availability for this particular date was also a selection criterion. More than 70 experts were contacted and invited. According to the current level of feedback, it may be assumed that at least 30 volunteer experts will be available. The final list of experts for answering consumer questions on 28 September 2019, will be decided solely by the participating consumers.

1. Updated (7 August 2019): Information about service provider, number of registrations

Further information about genome editing is available on the BfR website:

A-Z Index of Genome Editing:

https://www.bfr.bund.de/en/a-z_index/genome_editing-199425.html



BfR "Opinions app"

About the BfR

The German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) is a scientifically independent institution within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) in Germany. It advises the Federal Government and Federal Laender on questions of food, chemical and

product safety. The BfR conducts its own research on topics that are closely linked to its assessment tasks.

This text version is a translation of the original German text which is the only legally binding version.