A report has shown how the regulation of novel foods and genetically modified organisms is different around the world.

Research published by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) looked at international regulations on genetically modified and novel foods and how they differ from requirements in the United Kingdom.

Novel foods and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are subject to a large variation in regulatory approaches in non-EU countries. A novel food is a food or substance that was not used for human consumption to a significant degree within the EU before mid-May 1997.

Countries selected for the novel foods review included Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United States while Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, and the United States were studied in terms of GMOs.

Novel foods
The report, produced by Campden BRI, assessed how differences in regulations impacted trade and the approach countries have for authorization.

Japan and the U.S. do not directly address novel foods or food ingredients in legislation. Australia and Canada have a regulatory stance that more closely reflects the EU position, however, there are differences in the definitions, what falls under novel food legislation, and authorization procedures. In both markets, approval is required before such food is sold.

In the UK, local authorities, including trading standards and environmental health officers, are responsible for the inspection of novel foods on the market and enforcement of such legislation.

Genetically modified foods
For GMOs, the EU and Australia place emphasis on the process used to derive the product while Argentina, Canada, and the United States focus on the final product. The Australian approach relies on the regulator reviewing the lists of techniques that generate or do not generate GMOs. In Canada and the United States, genetically modified products are regulated under the same legal provisions as their conventional counterparts.

Argentina and Canada have no mandatory requirements for labelling GMO content in foods. Such labelling is required in Australia, Brazil, and the EU but the rules are different.

Results from the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra) consultation into the regulation of genetic technologies are due later this year.

Robin May, FSA chief scientific adviser, said it was vital to carry out research into all elements of the food system.

"Any possible changes to regulatory processes, whether relating to GMOs, novel foods or anything else, would be a decision for ministers but we provide advice based on the very latest science and

evidence available, ensuring that our absolute priority remains protection of public health."

A review of global agreements found there was no reference to novel foods or foods from genetically modified organisms.

The EU approach to regulating genetically modified crops has been the subject of a dispute assessed in the World Trade Organization. The EU's definition of what constitutes a novel food has also been discussed, particularly with South American states.

Genome editing opinions
A separate survey has found consumers have very low awareness and knowledge of genome edited food. Most had not heard of genome edited food or confused it with GM food.

The FSA commissioned Ipsos MORI to do a series of online workshops with 80 people across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland and an online survey of 2,066 consumers in these countries.

Ipsos MORI said low awareness of genome edited foods is unsurprising given there are not many such foods available worldwide, and none in the UK. Genome edited plants were deemed more acceptable, and presumed safer to eat, than edited animals.

The more informed consumers were, or became, the more accepting of genome edited food they were despite some still having concerns. People felt labelling of such foods should always inform on the presence of genome edited ingredients using the full term "genome edited." Some felt that, because it is a relatively new technique, there may be unknown food safety and animal welfare risks.

Most consumers felt genome edited foods should be regulated separately from GM foods, because they are two different techniques. However, many felt the level of scrutiny, testing and regulation should be just as high as for Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), at least at the start.

Genome editing is a technique to create specific changes to part of a living thing's DNA to improve existing characteristics. Genetic modification is used to artificially insert DNA from one living thing into the DNA of another living thing, introducing a new or different characteristic.

Before respondents were given the definition of genome editing, nearly a third said they "probably" or "definitely" should be sold in the UK, while slightly more said genome edited foods "probably" or "definitely" should not be sold and another third said "don't know."

Once shown the definition, two in five indicated that genome edited food products were "very" or "fairly" safe to eat, while three in 10 thought they were "very" or "fairly" unsafe or said they "did not know." Only 7 percent thought these food products were "very" safe.

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Source: **Report looks at how non-EU nations handle novel foods, GMOs**