

Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE)

Minutes of the 162nd ACRE meeting held on 15 December 2025

This was a virtual meeting with attendees present online only. The meeting was not open to the public.

Attendees

ACRE members:

Prof Jim Dunwell (Chair)
Dr Kathy Bamford
Prof Huw D Jones
Dr Huw E Jones
Prof Peter Lund
Prof Jake Malone
Prof Andrew Millar
Prof Andrew Prentis
Prof Andy Wilcox

Assessors:

Rachael Oakenfull, FSA

Official observers:

Mark Preston, Dept of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland
Colin Coates, Dept of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland
Ruth Hughes, Welsh Government
Gemma Pope, Welsh Government
Laura Bowden, Scottish Government
Iain Williams, GMI
Sophie Curson, GMI
Gerard Kerins, GMI

Defra:

Richard Kino

Sean Simpkins
Richard Lloyd Mills
Sasha Dennis
Lucy Foster

ACRE Secretariat:

Ben Beresford

1. Introduction

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed officials, assessors and observers.

The Committee offered its thanks to Martin Cannell and Louise Ball, who have now left Defra, for their work with ACRE over several years.

There was a tour-de-table with all Committee members introducing themselves.

2. GM food and feed import applications – ACRE advice

Defra have provided several recent applications for the import of genetically modified food and feed to the UK and welcomed discussion of these applications.

ACRE noted that some applications constituted no viable plant parts and so did not require ACRE advice. Where those applications did not provide full environmental risk assessments or environmental monitoring plans, it was agreed that was acceptable using the derogation available under Article 5(2) of retained Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 503/2013.

For some applications ACRE advised that they would provide full advice via email in due course.

3. Precision breeding regulations – applications and process

Defra provided a summary of the precision breeding regulations, which came into force on 13 November 2025 and invited feedback from ACRE on the applications received and the process for ACRE providing advice on these applications.

An ACRE member declared a potential conflict of interest as they knew the individual leading one application from previous professional work. As the ACRE member is not connected to the application it was agreed that there was no conflict, and they could contribute to the discussion.

ACRE discussed whether assigning a unique identifier to each edit made in a precision breeding application was prudent. Members agreed it would be helpful for

transparency but noted the administrative burden would grow very quickly. Defra officials agreed to take away members' suggestions and consider how they may fit within the legislation.

Another ACRE member declared a potential conflict of interest based on the proximity of laboratory space to an applicant. It was agreed that did not amount to a conflict.

ACRE discussed whether an application successfully demonstrated the requirements laid down by the precision breeding regulation. Members noted that the regulations make clear that applicants must demonstrate the feasibility of achieving the same outcome through traditional breeding methods and discussed whether that bar was met in this case. They requested further information from Defra officials to support their advice on the relevant application.

4. EU New Genomic Techniques updates

The EU's New Genomic Techniques proposals were published on 4th December 2025, following the conclusion of 'trilogues'. ACRE members discussed the differences between the EU's proposed regulations and the UK precision breeding regulations. Members noted that implementation may be some way off, and amendments may be made in the future.

5. Oilseed rape field trialling discussion

Defra requested initial advice on an upcoming application for a trial of genetically modified oilseed rape.

ACRE provided advice on the required isolation distance, and pollen barriers, but noted that more information is needed on the application before members can provide full advice.

6. Engineering Biology Sandbox project

Defra introduced this item, and asked members to note that applications would open on the MHRA website for a senior scientist as part of a project to deliver regulatory scientific research into engineered and synthetic bacteriophage.

Members noted the importance of the project, and the potential for applications including antimicrobial resistance as transfer agents.

Committee members were asked to consider circulating this job advert among their networks.

7. ACRE membership

The chair offered thanks to Committee members Andy Wilcox, Kathy Bamford, and Ben Raymond, who are due to leave ACRE in March 2026, for their excellent advice and input over their terms.

The chair asked that Committee members circulate the adverts for those members' replacements among their networks.