

Executive summary

Newcotiana Stakeholder Engagement in Italy and Spain

We interviewed 24 tobacco producers, technicians, researchers and policymakers in Spain and Italy to understand their opinions of: 1) plant molecular farming and 2) new plant breeding techniques. These two new biotechnologies are being used to produce molecules in tobacco plants to make medicines and cosmetics.

People we interviewed in both countries discussed many of the same challenges: costs have risen but prices paid to producers have not; quality and availability of labour; climate change; and the strict regulation of pest control products.

Most tobacco producers we spoke to told us that they were in favour of the idea of molecular farming and explained that these new biotechnologies may help to reduce some of their problems. For example, tobacco producers told us that molecular farming might improve farm income and reduce the need for some types of labour. Because molecular farming can be used to make medicine, they also felt this could reduce the stigma around tobacco production.

The use of new plant breeding techniques – which are currently considered to be genetic modification under European Union law – was also seen as acceptable, primarily because plant molecular farming has a positive, healthful purpose and is not a food crop. Most producers felt that the public would feel the same way, though some thought it was too soon to know what the public would think.

The main concerns discussed about molecular farming were if the change would bring about new farming practices, and if there would be a need for new machinery and infrastructure. Producers expressed a desire to try out any new varieties of tobacco themselves so they could understand what changes might be required. Tobacco producers discussed that they would need to know more about price per kilo and drying requirements (if any) of the new tobacco, and the attitude of large tobacco businesses to this idea, before they could make a decision to take part in tobacco molecular farming.

We found that tobacco producer associations would be important for any shift to plant molecular farming: these associations could facilitate contracts between tobacco producers and processors, provide loans of money or equipment and also provide farming advice for new tobacco varieties.

We thank those who took part in our study for their time and hospitality. We welcome any feedback you may have.

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