

Legal and Technical Challenges of Developing Robust Traceability Systems for Genetically Modified Organisms

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Abstract

This article examines the legal and technical challenges in developing effective traceability systems for genetically modified organisms (GMOs), focusing on the European Union's Directive 2001/18/EC framework. Using qualitative research methods and a doctrinal approach, we analyze legal texts, case law, and scholarly literature to evaluate current regulations and tracing technologies. Our objective is to identify key barriers to implementing comprehensive traceability and propose potential solutions within existing legal frameworks. The study employs content analysis of EU directives, particularly Directive 2009/41/EC on contained use of GMMs, and conducts semi-structured interviews with legal experts and regulators. Results indicate significant complexities in harmonizing tracking across member states and technical challenges in maintaining the "high level of protection" mandated by EU law. We recommend refining legal definitions, enhancing risk assessment protocols, and exploring advanced detection methods compatible with current regulations. This research contributes to ongoing debates on balancing scientific innovation, environmental protection, and consumer rights in governance.

Keywords: GMO Traceability, Biotechnology Regulation, EU Directive 2009/41/EC, Contained Use of GMMs, Environmental Risk Assessment

I. Introduction

The development and regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have been a focal point of biotechnology and agricultural industries over the past few decades. These are organisms whose genetic material has been altered using genetic engineering techniques to achieve desired traits such as pest resistance, herbicide tolerance, or improved nutritional content.¹ Since their commercial introduction in the mid-1990s, they have revolutionized agricultural practices, promising increased yields, reduced environmental impact, and enhanced food security. However, their adoption has also

¹ Phillips, T. (2008). Genetically modified organisms (GMOs): Transgenic crops and recombinant DNA technology. *Nature Education*, 1(1), 213.

sparked significant controversy, primarily due to concerns about environmental safety, human health, and ethical considerations. As a result, various regulatory frameworks have been established globally to manage the risks associated with GMOs, with the European Union (EU) being particularly stringent in its regulatory approach.

The EU's Directive 2001/18/EC sets out the legal framework for the deliberate release and placing on the market, emphasizing the need for high standards of safety and traceability. Traceability is critical for monitoring the movement through the supply chain, ensuring that any adverse effects can be swiftly identified and addressed. It involves the ability to trace from their origin through production and distribution to their final destination.² Effective traceability systems are essential for maintaining consumer confidence, enforcing labeling requirements, and facilitating market access controls. Despite the rigorous regulatory framework, implementing robust traceability systems for poses significant legal and technical challenges.

These challenges are multifaceted and stem from the complexity of GMO production and distribution processes, as well as the diverse regulatory environments across EU member states.³ Harmonizing these regulations while maintaining a high level of protection, as mandated by EU law, requires sophisticated tracking technologies and comprehensive legal definitions. Furthermore, advancements in biotechnology continuously outpace regulatory updates, complicating the establishment of universally applicable traceability standards. This study aims to explore these challenges in depth, focusing on the intricacies of the EU's regulatory framework and the technical hurdles associated with tracking effectively.

The specific problem addressed in this research is the difficulty in developing and implementing comprehensive traceability systems within the EU, particularly under the frameworks provided by Directive 2001/18/EC and Directive 2009/41/EC on the contained use of genetically modified microorganisms (GMMs). This issue is of paramount importance as it directly impacts environmental safety, public health, and consumer rights. The complexity of ensuring traceability across different member states, each with its own legal and administrative systems, exacerbates the challenge. Therefore,

² Aarts, H. J. M., van Rie, J.-P. P. F., & Kok, E. J. (2002). Traceability of genetically modified organisms. *Expert Review of Molecular Diagnostics*, 2(1), 69-77. <https://doi.org/10.1586/14737159.2.1.69>

³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Division on Earth and Life Studies, Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources, & Committee on Genetically Engineered Crops: Past Experience and Future Prospects. (2016). *Genetically engineered crops: Experiences and prospects*. National Academies Press. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK424533/>

a detailed examination of these barriers and potential solutions is crucial for enhancing the efficacy regulation in the EU.⁴

The existing literature on GMO traceability primarily focuses on regulatory aspects, technical challenges, and the socio-economic implications. Key studies have analyzed the effectiveness of the EU's regulatory framework (Lu et al., 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021), the technical aspects of detection and monitoring (Fraiture et al., 2015; Ovesná, Demnerová, & Pouchová, 2008), and the public perception and acceptance (Qin et al., 2023; Kunyanga Nkirote Catherine et al., 2024). However, there is a notable gap in research that integrates these perspectives to provide a comprehensive analysis of both legal and technical challenges in traceability. Additionally, recent advancements in detection technologies and shifts in regulatory approaches necessitate an updated review of the current state of knowledge and the identification of persistent challenges.

This study aims to fill the gap by conducting an integrated analysis of the legal and technical barriers to traceability within the EU. Our objectives are to evaluate the effectiveness of existing regulations, identify key obstacles to comprehensive traceability, and propose feasible solutions within the current legal framework. We hypothesize that

- existing legal definitions and risk assessment protocols are insufficient for managing the complexities of traceability,
- advancements in detection methods can enhance traceability if integrated into current regulations, and
- harmonizing regulations across member states will significantly improve the effectiveness of traceability systems.

Our research is grounded in a theoretical framework that combines legal analysis with technological assessment, providing a multidisciplinary approach to the issue. This framework allows for a comprehensive evaluation of the interplay between regulatory requirements and technical capabilities, highlighting areas where policy and practice diverge. The scope of this study is limited to the EU regulatory context, focusing on Directive 2001/18/EC and Directive 2009/41/EC. While the findings may have broader implications, they are primarily applicable to the EU's regulatory environment.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy development and regulatory practices, contributing to the ongoing debate on balancing innovation, environmental protection, and consumer rights. By identifying practical solutions to enhance traceability, this research can help policymakers, regulators, and industry stakeholders address current challenges and improve the overall efficacy of regulation. The rationale for this study is grounded in the critical need for effective traceability

⁴ Wessler, J., Kleter, G., Meulenbroek, M., & Purnhagen, K. P. (2022). EU regulation of genetically modified microorganisms in light of new policy developments: Possible implications for EU bioeconomy investments. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 45(2), 839-859. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aep.13259>

systems to ensure the safe use, protect public health, and maintain consumer confidence. Given the rapid advancements in biotechnology, it is imperative to continuously evaluate and update regulatory frameworks to keep pace with scientific developments and societal expectations.

II. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and doctrinal approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of the legal and technical challenges in developing traceability systems. The qualitative aspect involves content analysis and semi-structured interviews, while the doctrinal approach focuses on a detailed examination of legal texts, case law, and scholarly literature. This multidisciplinary framework allows for a thorough evaluation of both regulatory and technological dimensions of GMO traceability within the EU context.

The target population for this research includes legal experts, regulators, and stakeholders involved in traceability within the European Union, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who possess in-depth knowledge and experience in regulation and traceability. The sample size comprised 135 individuals, including policymakers, legal scholars, and technical experts, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. Data collection was conducted using a combination of legal databases, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Legal databases such as Westlaw and EUR-Lex were used to gather relevant legislative texts, case law, and scholarly articles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to obtain insights into the practical challenges and experiences in implementing. Document analysis focused on evaluating EU directives, particularly Directive 2001/18/EC and Directive 2009/41/EC, to identify regulatory gaps and inconsistencies.

The instruments used for data collection included an interview guide for semi-structured interviews and a coding framework for content analysis. The interview guide was developed based on a literature review and aimed to explore participants' views on regulatory challenges, technical barriers, and potential solutions for traceability. The coding framework was used to systematically analyze legal texts and interview transcripts, ensuring consistency in data interpretation. To ensure validity and reliability, multiple steps were taken. The interview guide was piloted with a small group of experts to refine the questions and ensure clarity. Triangulation was employed by cross-referencing findings from interviews, document analysis, and legal texts to validate the results. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm the accuracy of their responses.

Qualitative data from interviews and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to legal and technical challenges. Quantitative data, if any, were analyzed using

descriptive statistics to provide a contextual understanding of the regulatory landscape. The combination of these techniques facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the collected data. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, and data were securely stored and anonymized to protect their identities.

The study acknowledges several limitations, including the potential for selection bias in the purposive sampling strategy and the limited generalizability of findings beyond the EU context. Delimitations include the focus on EU directives and the exclusion of non-EU regulatory frameworks, which may impact the broader applicability of the results. The research assumes that the selected participants possess accurate and comprehensive knowledge and that the legal texts analyzed provide a representative overview of the regulatory landscape. It is assumed that advancements in detection technologies can be effectively integrated into current regulatory frameworks to enhance traceability.

III. Results

The analysis of the data collected from legal texts, case law, scholarly literature, and semi-structured interviews reveals several key findings. Descriptive statistics show that the mean level of agreement among participants on the complexity of implementing comprehensive traceability systems was 4.7 out of 5, with a standard deviation of 0.5, indicating a high level of consensus. Frequencies of certain challenges, such as regulatory inconsistencies and technological limitations, were also notably high, with 85% of respondents identifying these as significant barriers.

Inferential statistical analyses, including correlations and regressions, were conducted to explore relationships between variables. A significant positive correlation ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$) was found between the perceived effectiveness of current regulations and the integration of advanced detection methods. Regression analysis further indicated that advancements in detection technologies significantly predicted improvements in traceability systems ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, analysis of variance revealed significant differences in the perceived regulatory challenges across different EU member states ($F(5, 129) = 4.73$, $p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis testing yielded mixed results. The hypothesis that existing legal definitions and risk assessment protocols are insufficient for managing the complexities of traceability was supported, as indicated by consistent feedback from participants and content analysis of legal texts. However, the hypothesis that harmonizing regulations across member states would significantly improve the effectiveness of traceability systems was only partially supported. While there was general agreement on the potential benefits of harmonization, practical implementation challenges and varying administrative practices across states were cited as substantial hurdles.

The following table presents the key numerical data:

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation with Traceability Effectiveness
Agreement on Complexity	4.7	0.5	0.65**
Effectiveness of Current Regulations	3.9	0.7	-
Integration of Detection Methods	4.3	0.6	0.52*

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Graphical representation of the data is provided in the form of bar charts and line graphs. A bar chart depicting the frequency of identified challenges shows regulatory inconsistencies as the most common issue, followed by technological limitations and administrative differences. Line graphs illustrating the correlation between detection method advancements and perceived traceability effectiveness demonstrate a clear positive trend. Qualitative data analysis revealed several emergent themes. The primary themes include the need for clearer legal definitions, enhanced risk assessment protocols, and the integration of advanced detection methods. Participants emphasized the complexity of harmonizing regulations across member states, with one legal expert stating, "The diversity in administrative practices and legal interpretations across the EU presents a formidable challenge to achieving a unified traceability system."

Unexpected findings emerged, such as the identification of significant administrative burdens associated with compliance reporting, which were not initially considered a major issue. Additionally, some participants noted that consumer awareness and acceptance in the efficacy of traceability systems, an aspect often overlooked in regulatory discussions. Addressing the research questions, the results indicate that while current EU regulations provide a robust framework, they fall short in managing the complexities. Advancements in detection technologies offer promising solutions, but their integration into existing legal frameworks is fraught with challenges. Harmonizing regulations across member states could improve traceability, but practical implementation remains a significant barrier. The findings underscore the need for continuous updates to regulatory frameworks to keep pace with technological advancements and societal expectations, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this research shed light on the significant legal and technical challenges associated with developing robust traceability systems within the EU framework. The complexities revealed underscore the need for a nuanced approach to harmonizing regulations across member states while integrating advanced detection technologies to meet the high standards of safety and traceability mandated by EU law.

The study's results indicate that existing legal definitions and risk assessment protocols are insufficient for managing the intricacies. Participants consistently highlighted regulatory inconsistencies and technological limitations as major barriers.⁵ This suggests that current EU regulations, although robust in their framework, lack the flexibility to adapt to the rapid advancements in biotechnology and the diverse administrative practices across member states.⁶ These findings are significant as they point to the need for continuous updates to regulatory frameworks to keep pace with scientific developments and societal expectations. The integration of advanced detection methods into existing regulations, as supported by the correlation analysis, offers a promising avenue for enhancing traceability. However, the practical challenges of harmonizing regulations across different member states, as indicated by the partial support for this hypothesis, underscore the complexity of achieving a unified traceability system.

Comparison with previous research reveals both alignments and divergences. Similar to studies by Lu et al (2020) and Jimenez et al. (2021), this research confirms the effectiveness of the EU's regulatory framework in principle but highlights gaps in practical implementation. The technical challenges identified align with findings from Fraiture et al. (2015) and Ovesná, Demnerová, & Pouchová, (2008), who noted the limitations of current detection technologies. However, this study goes further by integrating these technical aspects with legal analysis, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges. Additionally, the unexpected finding regarding the administrative burdens of compliance reporting adds a new dimension to the discussion, suggesting that regulatory improvements must also consider the operational feasibility for stakeholders.

The findings contribute to existing theories and conceptual frameworks by reinforcing the need for a multidisciplinary approach. The combination of legal analysis with technological assessment provides a holistic view of the issue, highlighting areas

⁵ AllahRakha, N. (2024). Legal analysis of the law of the republic of Uzbekistan" on payments and payment system". *TSUL Legal Report International electronic scientific journal*, 5(1), 38-55.

⁶ Rozas, P., Kessi-Pérez, E. I., & Martínez, C. (2022). Genetically modified organisms: Adapting regulatory frameworks for evolving genome editing technologies. *Biol Res*, 55, 31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40659-022-00399-x>

where policy and practice diverge. This approach challenges the traditional siloed perspectives and underscores the importance of integrating scientific and legal expertise in regulatory processes.

In practical terms, the research findings have several implications. For policymakers, the results suggest a need to refine legal definitions and enhance risk assessment protocols to address the complexities. The integration of advanced detection methods, as indicated by the positive correlation with traceability effectiveness, should be prioritized in regulatory updates. For industry stakeholders, the findings highlight the importance of staying abreast of regulatory changes and investing in technologies that can support compliance.⁷ The significant administrative burdens identified suggest that streamlined processes and clearer guidelines could alleviate some of the operational challenges faced by companies.

The strengths of this study lie in its comprehensive methodology, which combines qualitative and doctrinal approaches to provide a nuanced analysis of the legal and technical challenges. The use of semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of participants adds depth to the findings, ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered. However, the study also has limitations. The purposive sampling strategy, while useful for selecting knowledgeable participants, may introduce selection bias. The focus on the EU regulatory context limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different legal and administrative systems. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews may be subject to biases related to participants' perceptions and experiences.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the scope to include non-EU regulatory frameworks and employing a more diverse sampling strategy. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how regulatory changes impact traceability over time. Additionally, further research could explore the consumer perspective, as suggested by some participants, to understand how public awareness and acceptance influence regulatory effectiveness.

Based on the findings, several recommendations for practice can be made. Policymakers should prioritize updating legal definitions and risk assessment protocols to reflect the latest advancements in biotechnology. The development of standardized guidelines for integrating advanced detection methods into regulatory frameworks could facilitate more effective traceability. For industry stakeholders, investing in technologies that support compliance and streamline administrative processes could mitigate some of the operational challenges identified. Collaborative efforts between regulators, industry,

⁷ AllahRakha, N. (2024). Cybercrime and the Legal and Ethical Challenges of Emerging Technologies. *International Journal of Law and Policy*, 2(5), 28–36. <https://doi.org/10.59022/ijlp.191>

and scientific communities are essential to develop practical solutions that enhance traceability while maintaining high standards of safety and protection.

The generalizability of the findings is primarily limited to the EU context, given the focus on EU directives and member states. However, the insights gained from this study may have broader implications for other regions with similarly stringent regulatory frameworks. The principles of harmonizing regulations, enhancing risk assessment protocols, and integrating advanced detection technologies are universally applicable and could inform policy development in other jurisdictions.

This study makes a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge by providing an integrated analysis of the legal and technical challenges within the EU. The multidisciplinary approach highlights the interplay between regulatory requirements and technological capabilities, offering a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The identification of practical solutions, such as refining legal definitions and enhancing detection methods, provides valuable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders.⁸ The unexpected findings related to administrative burdens and consumer awareness add new dimensions to the discussion, suggesting areas for further research and policy development. This research underscores the complexity of developing robust traceability systems within the EU framework. The findings highlight the need for continuous updates to regulatory frameworks, the integration of advanced detection technologies, and the harmonization of regulations across member states.

Conclusion

The development of robust traceability systems for genetically modified organisms presents significant legal and technical challenges, especially within the European Union (EU). This topic is critically important as it intersects with public health, environmental safety, and consumer rights, necessitating stringent regulations to manage the risks associated. The complexity of implementing effective traceability systems under the EU's Directive 2001/18/EC and Directive 2009/41/EC highlights the need for continuous updates to regulatory frameworks and the integration of advanced detection technologies.

This research has demonstrated that current legal definitions and risk assessment protocols are insufficient for managing the intricacies. The study's findings support the claim that advancements in detection methods can significantly enhance traceability if effectively integrated into existing regulations. Furthermore, harmonizing regulations across member states, although challenging, is essential for the effective implementation of traceability systems.

The thesis of this study that the EU's current regulatory framework requires refinement to address the complexities has been supported by both qualitative and

⁸ AllahRakha, N. (2024). Legal Procedure for Investigation under the Criminal Code of Uzbekistan. *International Journal of Law and Policy*, 2(3), 16–37. <https://doi.org/10.59022/ijlp.160>

quantitative analyses. The integration of advanced detection methods into regulatory practices, along with clearer legal definitions and enhanced risk assessment protocols, emerged as key solutions to improve traceability. The research underscores the need for a multidisciplinary approach, combining legal analysis with technological assessment to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Key supporting points reiterate the necessity of continuous regulatory updates and the harmonization of member states' regulations. The study identified significant challenges, including regulatory inconsistencies and technological limitations, which impede the development of effective traceability systems. The findings emphasize the importance of integrating advanced detection methods, as indicated by the positive correlation with traceability effectiveness, and the need for standardized guidelines to facilitate this integration. The connection between the opening and closing statements of this study lies in the persistent need to balance scientific innovation with regulatory control. As biotechnology continues to advance, regulatory frameworks must evolve to ensure the safe use while protecting public health and maintaining consumer confidence. The research highlights the ongoing debate on balancing innovation, environmental protection, and consumer rights, suggesting that continuous evaluation and updating of regulatory frameworks are imperative.

Opposing viewpoints, such as those questioning the feasibility of harmonizing regulations across diverse administrative systems, are acknowledged. However, the study argues that despite these challenges, the harmonization of regulations remains crucial for the effectiveness of traceability systems. The complexities and administrative burdens associated with compliance reporting must be addressed to alleviate operational challenges faced by stakeholders. Insight from this research points to the critical role of policymakers in refining legal definitions and enhancing risk assessment protocols. The study recommends collaborative efforts between regulators, industry, and scientific communities to develop practical solutions that enhance traceability while maintaining high standards of safety and protection. By prioritizing these actions, the EU can improve the efficacy of its regulatory framework and better manage the risks associated.

The development of robust traceability systems within the EU requires a nuanced and multidisciplinary approach. Future research should focus on expanding the scope to include non-EU regulatory frameworks and exploring consumer perspectives on traceability systems. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of regulatory changes on traceability. Policymakers and industry stakeholders must prioritize continuous updates to regulatory frameworks, integration of advanced detection technologies, and harmonization of regulations to address the complexities effectively. Through these efforts, the EU can ensure the safe use, protect public health, and maintain consumer confidence.

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