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CRISPR/Cas Innovations for Dual Management of Crop Pests and Diseases

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Global agriculture is under constant strain from insect pests and plant diseases, which together destroy more than a third of total crop production every year. This not only reduces food availability but also affects the economic stability of farming communities. The widespread use of chemical pesticides, though effective at first, has triggered serious problems, pests developing resistance, contamination of soil and water, and risks to human and environmental health. At the same time, traditional breeding for resistance traits is a slow process and often constrained by the limited genetic diversity in current crop varieties. CRISPR-Cas genome editing has emerged as a modern solution that addresses these gaps with far greater accuracy and efficiency. In insect pests, CRISPR can precisely disrupt genes vital for survival or spread, and technologies like gene drives can push these modifications rapidly through populations, potentially reducing pest pressure or limiting disease transmission. In crops, editing specific susceptibility or defense-related genes can significantly strengthen plant immune responses, providing long-lasting protection against major pathogens. Together, these advancements can help farmers achieve more stable yields while relying less on chemical inputs, supporting both economic and ecological sustainability. Still, the adoption of CRISPR in agriculture must be guided by strong ethics, rigorous biosafety assessments, and thoughtful regulations, ensuring responsible testing and community participation in decision-making. With careful governance and continued research progress, CRISPR-Cas technologies hold the potential to reshape crop protection, delivering higher productivity and building a more resilient global food system for the future.

Keywords: Plant immunity enhancement, Sustainable crop protection, Gene drives, Food security innovation, Environmental biosafety

Introduction

Across the world, farmers continue to battle serious losses caused by insects and plant diseases. It is estimated that insect pests alone destroy nearly one-fifth of global agricultural production each year, and plant pathogens contribute to another significant portion of crop damage, ultimately lowering food security and inflicting major economic losses (Savary *et al*., 2019). To cope with these threats, chemical pesticides have long been the first line of defence. However, their frequent and sometimes indiscriminate use has fueled resistance in pests, polluted soil and water systems, and negatively affected beneficial organisms such as pollinators and natural enemies (Sparks & Nauen, 2015; Matson *et al*., 1997). Traditional breeding approaches, while valuable, are often slow and constrained by the limited genetic variation available within cultivated species. Evaluation of newer insecticides against major sap-feeding pests (Devi *et al.*, 2024) highlights the continued need for alternative, durable solutions such as CRISPR-enabled resistance to reduce chemical dependence.

Amid these challenges, the CRISPR-Cas genome editing system has gained immense attention as a modern solution for crop protection. This technology allows highly precise changes to plant or pest DNA in a faster, simpler, and more affordable manner compared to conventional genetic modification (Zhang *et al*., 2020). Since CRISPR can create targeted edits without introducing external genes, it is considered more acceptable to consumers and regulators. Importantly, CRISPR holds dual benefits, strengthening plant resistance to pathogens while also offering new ways to disrupt harmful traits in insect pests. As the demand for increased food production grows, CRISPR-based innovations are emerging as a critical tool to support sustainable agriculture with reduced environmental impact.

Table1. CRISPR-Cas is Emerging as a Dual Solution for Crop Pests and Diseases

Feature / Need	Current Scenario in Agriculture	How CRISPR-Cas Addresses It	Benefit to Farmers & Food Security
Speed of developing resistance	Traditional breeding takes 8–12 years	Precise editing within 1–3 years	Faster release of resistant varieties
Pesticide dependency	High insecticide & fungicide use, resistance & pollution	Reduces need for chemicals by targeting pests and boosting plant immunity	Lower input cost & safer environment
Vector-borne diseases	Hard to control pests + pathogens together	Gene editing in insect vectors can block disease transmission	Dual protection in single approach
Specificity of control	Broad-spectrum pesticides kill beneficial insects	CRISPR targets only selected pests/genes	Protects natural enemies & pollinators
Climate change stress	New pests & stronger diseases emerging	Rapid editing for adaptive traits	More resilient crops and yield stability

(Sparks & Nauen (2015); Chen et al. (2019); Guo et al. (2018))

What is Crispr-Cas?

CRISPR-Cas is a cutting-edge genome editing approach that enables researchers to alter DNA in plants, animals, and insects with remarkable accuracy, much like using a fine-tuned tool that cuts exactly where needed. The technology is inspired by a natural protection strategy used by bacteria. These microorganisms keep fragments of viral DNA within special repeating regions known as Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR) and rely on Cas (CRISPR-associated) proteins to recognize and destroy invading viruses during future attacks.

In 2012, scientists adapted this bacterial mechanism into a revolutionary gene-editing system called CRISPR-Cas9. With the help of a small guide RNA, Cas9 can be directed to cut a precise location in the genome (Jinek *et al*., 2012). When the DNA is broken, the cell's own repair pathways take over, allowing targeted removal of unwanted genes, correction of genetic sequences, or introduction of beneficial traits. Field-based pest incidence studies in vegetable crops demonstrate how rapidly insect populations can escalate under favourable conditions, further emphasizing the need for durable CRISPR-enabled resistance strategies (Singh *et al*., 2023).

A key strength of CRISPR is how quick and accurate it is compared with conventional breeding or earlier genetic engineering tools. Improving crop resistance through traditional breeding can often take a decade or more, whereas CRISPR can deliver the same improvements within a fraction of the time and with higher precision. In many cases, the edits can be made without inserting external DNA, which may lead to smoother regulatory approval and greater acceptance among consumers (Wolt *et al*., 2016). CRISPR-Cas offers a smarter, cleaner way to rewrite the genetic instructions of crops, helping to develop varieties that can thrive against pests and diseases while reducing the need for chemical pesticides and supporting a more sustainable farming future.

CRISPR for Dual Management of Pests and Diseases

Across the globe, farmers are constantly challenged by insect pests and plant diseases that significantly reduce crop yields and threaten global food supplies. Heavy reliance on chemical pesticides has helped manage these threats, but it has also accelerated resistance in pests, increased production costs, and damaged ecological balance (Sparks & Nauen, 2015; Savary *et al*., 2019). In this context, CRISPR-Cas genome editing has emerged as a smart and sustainable innovation capable of tackling both problems together with high precision.

Gene Editing to Manage Insect Pests: With CRISPR, scientists can alter specific genes in harmful insects, especially those linked to survival, reproduction, or ability to spread diseases. A particularly promising approach is gene drive technology, which allows engineered traits to rapidly pass through insect populations. For example, CRISPR-based gene drives in mosquitoes targeting female fertility have resulted in steep drops in population levels (Hammond *et al*., 2016). Similar research on serious crop pests such as the fall armyworm has shown that editing genes responsible for detoxification can reduce their survival on treated plants. Another success comes from disrupting virus transmission in whiteflies, leading to reduced spread of Tomato Yellow Leaf Curl Virus in tomatoes. By weakening pests directly, these strategies can reduce pesticide dependence and help conserve helpful insects like bees and natural predators.

Strengthening Crop Resistance to Diseases: CRISPR also plays a major role in disease prevention by fine-tuning plant immune responses. Unlike conventional breeding, which may take years to introduce a single resistance trait, CRISPR allows quick and accurate improvement of crop genetics (Chen *et al*., 2019). Notable achievements include:

- **Rice** with long-lasting resistance to bacterial blight through targeted editing of SWEET genes (Li *et al*., 2012)
- **Tomato** plants engineered to resist Tomato Yellow Leaf Curl Virus
- **Potato** with enhanced protection against late blight, a disease with historic global impact

Such CRISPR-derived varieties enable farmers to achieve higher productivity using fewer fungicide applications, supporting both economic and environmental sustainability.

A Dual Pathway to Sustainable Crop Protection

CRISPR-Cas technology offers a combined advantage for modern agriculture:

- Controls destructive pests and harmful pathogens
- Cuts down the need for chemical pesticides
- Supports better yields and food security
- Helps protect the environment for future generations

Though proper biosafety checks and careful regulatory oversight remain essential before widespread adoption, CRISPR stands out as a transformative tool that can strengthen farming systems and help build a more secure and sustainable food future.

Ethical, Regulatory & Safety Considerations

Although CRISPR-Cas technologies bring exciting opportunities to protect crops from pests and diseases, they also introduce important ethical, environmental, and policy considerations. A key issue revolves around gene drives, systems designed to push specific genetic traits quickly through pest populations. While this could reduce the numbers or harmful behaviors of insects, there is a risk that edited genes might spread to unintended regions or closely related species, potentially disturbing natural ecosystems (National Academies of Sciences, 2016). For this reason, experts stress the importance of careful step-by-step testing that includes controlled lab experiments, ecological impact assessments, and limited field evaluations before any large-scale release. The regulatory landscape for genome-edited crops also differs across countries. In some places, CRISPR-edited plants that do not contain foreign genes are treated differently from traditional GMOs, whereas others apply the same strict rules to both. To ensure smooth progress and responsible use, globally aligned guidelines would help scientists, industries, and farmers adopt these technologies with confidence.

Public trust is another crucial factor. Research indicates that acceptance grows when gene editing efforts are transparent, openly discussed, and clearly linked to benefits such as reduced pesticide application and improved environmental sustainability. Farmers will also need proper education and support to integrate CRISPR-based solutions into existing pest and disease management strategies. In summary, safe and successful deployment of CRISPR in agriculture depends on scientific responsibility, effective regulation, and active engagement with society. When these pieces come together, genome editing can contribute greatly to a more secure and sustainable farming future.

Conclusion and future prospects

CRISPR-Cas offers a promising and environmentally friendly way to safeguard crops against insects and diseases. By boosting natural resistance in plants and disrupting damaging traits in pests, this technology can help farmers rely less on chemical pesticides, lower production expenses, and harvest more from the same land. In a world where climate change is making farming increasingly uncertain, CRISPR provides a faster and more precise option to protect our food supply. However, the success of this innovation depends on careful oversight. Thorough biosafety evaluations, clear and consistent regulatory guidelines, and meaningful dialogue with farmers and the wider community are all vital to ensuring responsible use. With science, policy, and public trust working together, CRISPR-based solutions can contribute to a healthier environment and a stronger, more secure future for agriculture.

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