ISBR
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR BIOSAFETY RESEARCH

Members' survey

Dear colleague,

While we are preparing for what is shaping up to be a phenomenal ISBR2025 in Ghent, Belgium, in just over two weeks, the board is undertaking a strategic evaluation to ensure the continued relevance and vitality of our society. Your participation in this process is essential.

We kindly request that you invest a small amount of time (~7 minutes) to complete our brief survey,"Perspectives on ISBR's Future." Your insights are critical to shaping a flourishing and impactful future for the ISBR.

Additional background information is provided below and in the survey itself.

Please complete the survey at your earliest convenience, but not later than Monday, 27 October: **https://forms.gle/MhMpgQpoev5oxhiG7**

Thank you in advance for your valued contribution to the future of the ISBR.

Don’t hesitate to contact us should you have any questions or want to engage further.

Sincerely,

Hennie Groenewald
President-elect, ISBR

Background to the members' survey on "Perspectives on ISBR's Future"

October 2025

Context and Objective

Questions regarding the continued relevance and viability of the ISBR, as well as its identity and relationships with various stakeholders, are raised from time to time. We therefore thought it prudent to gather the views of our members and other relevant stakeholders on these matters to support a meaningful process of self-evaluation and forward-looking strategic planning.

Proposed Action Plan

1. Develop and execute a survey for ISBR members to gauge their opinions on relevant matters.
2. Present the outcomes at the ISBR2025 members' meeting in Ghent on Tue, 4 Nov @ 18:00.
3. Consider all inputs, prepare recommendations, and implement them accordingly.

The ISBR: History, Evolution, and Strategic Outlook

The International Society for Biosafety Research (ISBR) began as the International Symposium on the Biosafety of Genetically Modified Organisms (ISBGMO) in 1990. That inaugural conference was organized to improve communication among scientists studying GMOs, and it quickly became a core biennial forum for sharing biosafety research worldwide. At the 6th Symposium (Saskatoon, Canada, 2000), **the ISBR was formally incorporated as an international learned society.** Since its inception, the ISBR's stated mission has been *"to promote the practice and application of science in the fields of agricultural biotechnology and environmental risk analysis,"* encouraging research that supports the safe and effective use of biotechnology in food and agriculture. Currently, ISBR membership is informal and integrated with its biennial symposium: attending a symposium includes membership until the next meeting.

By the late 2000s, ISBR's biennial symposia had established a broad, international profile. These gatherings convene academic and industry researchers, regulators, NGOs and others to share their experience and expertise on biotechnology safety. For example, the 10th ISBGMO in 2008 (Wellington, NZ) featured an OECD-sponsored plenary on *"Risk Assessment – State of the Art".* **Over time, the content of ISBR meetings has evolved.** Early symposia focused mainly on reporting the results of biosafety experiments, such as studies on first-generation GM crops. More recent meetings have explicitly added sessions on regulatory policy, data requirements, public communication, and the adoption of new biotechnologies. By the 15th ISBR Symposium (Tarragona, Spain, 2019), themes like gene editing and sustainable biotechnology were prominent. The most recent symposium in St Louis (ISBR2023) drew 350 attendees from 47 countries and featured plenaries on topics such as social license for bio-innovation, risk analysis for persistent traits, and fit-for-purpose governance frameworks. **Throughout, the ISBR has emphasized rigorous science and data-driven debate on biosafety,** broadening its scope to cover everything from molecular studies to the socioeconomic aspects of GMO deployment.

The evolution of ISBR's agenda has paralleled changes in **the global biotech regulatory landscape and commercialization of GM products.** In 2000, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety established the first binding international regime for transboundary movements of GMOs. Regions like the EU have long applied a precautionary, value-based approach (e.g. the 2001/18/EC directive embeds ethical considerations in GMO approvals). More recently, many countries are updating rules for new breeding techniques (gene editing). Regulatory authorities worldwide are grappling with how to handle these technologies: for instance, ISBR leaders noted in 2019 that *"governments worldwide are similarly working to define their approach to regulating gene-edited organisms".* In parallel, **the GM product**

pipeline has remained surprisingly narrow. By 2024, some 27 countries cultivated GM crops on about 210 million hectares, but this involved only ten different crop species (mostly soybean, maize, cotton, and canola). Beyond plants, very few GM animals have been commercialized, and a handful of gene-edited livestock are only now reaching the market. These figures underscore that since the early 2000s, the umber of new GM products has not grown rapidly. Even as traditional transgenic crops saturate agriculture, **emerging applications** (gene drives, synthetic biology, precision fermentation, etc.) are raising novel biosafety questions. ISBR has begun to address these topics: both the 2019 and 2023 symposia included sessions and journal reviews on gene editing and gene drives, reflecting the society's effort to stay current with technological innovation.

These dynamics, mature regulatory regimes, limited new products, and a plateau in GMO biosafety research **pose challenges to ISBR's relevance and viability.** Some critics argue that ISBR's focus on the "GMO" category is a vestige of earlier debates and may no longer align with a risk-based, product-focused approach. After decades of study, major reviews report that approved GM crops have caused no observable harm to human or animal health, and many risk questions about first-generation traits are considered settled. In this context, **the incremental novelty in biosafety science is shrinking**. To date, the ISBR maintains that it serves a unique role by stressing reliance on "solid scientific data" over ideology and emphasizes the need for global dialogue on biotech risks and benefits. Even so, a narrow or outdated mandate could limit ISBR's ability to attract new engagement or funding. **With only symposium-based membership, limited product pipelines, and competing forums** (e.g. societies focused on broader biotechnology or policy), **the ISBR must carefully consider its strategic niche moving forward.**

Implications for ISBR's Relevance and Strategic Planning

The above trends suggest that the ISBR's current influence may be constrained. If current GMO issues are largely resolved and research output is plateauing, the ISBR risks becoming less central to the biotech conversation. **The society's future relevance will likely depend on adapting to the broader innovation landscape by integrating climate-smart biotech, biosecurity, or socioeconomic dimensions into its agenda, for example.** This will require candid assessment and appropriate response by the ISBR's leadership.

We therefore need our members' and stakeholders' candid inputs and opinions to inform our strategic planning.

ISBR symposia & presidents

Note: Please confirm the information below and send us the missing details if you know them.

Symposium					Chair/President	
Nr	Year	Date	City	Country	Name	Country
1st	1990	27-30 Nov	Kiawah Island	USA		
2nd	1992	11-14 May	Goslar	Germany		
3rd	1994	13-16 Nov	Monterey	USA		
4th	1996	14-18 Jul	Tsukuba	Japan		
5th	1998	6-10 Sep	Braunschweig	Germany	Joachim Schiemann	Germany
6th	2000	8-13 Jul	Saskatoon	Canada	Alan McHughen	USA
7th	2002	10-16 Oct	Beijing	China	Alan McHughen	USA
8th	2004	26-30 Sep	Montpellier	France	Alan McHughen	France
9th	2006	24-29 Sep	Jeju	Korea	Joachim Schiemann	Germany
10th	2008	16-21 Nov	Wellington	New Zealand	Joachim Schiemann	Germany
11th	2010	15-20 Nov	Buenos Aires	Argentina	Patrick Rüdelsheim	Belgium
12th	2012	16-20 Sep	St Louis	USA	Bao-Rong Lu	China
13th	2014	9-13 Nov	Cape Town	South Africa	Morven McLean	USA
14th	2017	4-8 Jun	Guadalajara	Mexico	Alan Gray	UK
15th	2019	1-4 Apr	Tarragona	Spain	Ariel Alvarez-Morales	Mexico
16th	2023	30 Apr-4 May	St Louis	USA	Joe Smith	Australia
17th	2025	2-6 Nov	Ghent	Belgium	Joerg Romeis	Switzerland
18th	2027				Hennie Groenewald	South Africa
19th	2029					

International Society for Biosafety Research (ISBR) | 1900 L Street, NW, Suite 302 | Washington, DC 20036 US