

⚠ CONFIDENTIAL RESEARCH REPORT ⚠

Cross-Crop ExRNA Meta-Analysis: Mechanism of Action Synthesis

Analysis of 6 crop species: Spinach, Broccoli, Maize, Wheat, Quinoa, Soybean

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ExRNA-Ag Biology Research Engine

A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research Question: How do bacterial extracellular small RNAs (exRNAs) improve seed germination across diverse crop species, and what is the core mechanism of action?

Approach: Meta-analysis of 6 crop-specific ExRNA target prediction studies (342 total predicted targets across Spinach, Broccoli, Maize, Wheat, Quinoa, and Soybean). Each crop underwent bioinformatic antisense target prediction followed by pathway-level mechanistic inference based on published functional genomics literature.

PRIMARY MECHANISM OF ACTION: Hormone Rebalancing (ABA/GA Axis Suppression) is universal across all 6 crops (score 17/18), achieved through coordinated downregulation of ABA biosynthesis enzymes, ABA transporters, ABA signaling components, and transcriptional regulators of dormancy. This shifts the germination-controlling ABA/GA ratio decisively toward gibberellin dominance.

SECONDARY MECHANISMS: (1) **Defense Downshift** (score 15/18) - conserved across 5/6 crops, liberating metabolic resources from costly immune surveillance; (2) **ROS/Redox Optimization** (score 12/18) - tuning reactive oxygen species into the "oxidative window" for germination signaling; (3) **Metabolic Priming** and **Transport/Ion Homeostasis** (both score 11/18) - coordinated metabolic recalibration and ion flux optimization.

CRITICAL UNCERTAINTY: The entire exRNA hypothesis rests on a single discriminating experiment - **RNase treatment of the bacterial EPS preparation.** If RNase abolishes the germination phenotype, RNA is the active agent. If not, EPS osmoprimer or polysaccharide elicitor effects are the true mechanism. **Recommended first experiment: RNase elimination test (cost <\$500, timeline 2 weeks).**

PRACTICAL IMPLICATION: If the RNA mechanism validates, a universal biomarker panel of 8-15 gene families can be deployed for rapid validation in any crop species. If it fails, osmoprimer protocols should be optimized and RNA discarded as irrelevant.

B. CROSS-CROP THEME MATRIX

MoA Theme	Spinach	Broccoli	Maize	Wheat	Quinoa	Soybean	Cross-Crop Score
Hormone Rebalancing (ABA/GA)	3 (6)	3 (5)	3 (4)	3 (4)	2 (2)	3 (3)	17/18 ✓ UNIVERSAL
Defense Downshift	3 (10+)	3 (7)	2 (5)	3 (18)	2 (4)	2 (3)	15/18 ✓ Near-Universal
ROS/Redox Optimization	3 (5)	2 (3)	2 (1)	2 (2)	1 (1)	2 (2)	12/18 ✓ Strong
Metabolic Priming	2 (5)	2 (4)	2 (2)	1 (2)	1 (1)	3 (2)	11/18 ○ Moderate
Transport/Ion Homeostasis	2 (7)	2 (3)	2 (2)	2 (5)	3 (2)	0	11/18 ○ Moderate
Epigenetic Derepression	3 (6)	3 (5)	1 (2)	2 (3)	0	0	9/18 ○ Dicot-Specific?
Cell Wall Remodeling	1 (1)	2 (4)	1 (1)	1 (2)	0	2 (2)	7/18 ○ Weak
RNA Processing	1 (1)	2 (3)	1 (1)	2 (3)	0	1 (2)	7/18 ○ Weak
Cell Cycle/Growth	0	2 (3)	0	1 (3)	0	0	3/18 ✗ Rare

Interpretation: Hormone rebalancing is the ONLY theme present at score ≥ 2 in ALL six crops, making it the definitive core mechanism. Defense downshift is near-universal (absent only in quinoa's limited 31-target dataset). Epigenetic derepression is surprisingly dicot-specific (strong in spinach/broccoli, weak/absent in monocots and quinoa), suggesting mechanistic divergence between taxonomic groups or genuine biological differences in chromatin-based germination control.

C. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY MECHANISMS OF ACTION

C.1 Primary MoA: Hormone Rebalancing (ABA/GA Axis Suppression)

Universal across all 6 crops - This is the primary driver of improved germination.

Molecular Logic: The transition from seed dormancy to active germination is controlled by the ratio of abscisic acid (ABA, the "brake") to gibberellic acid (GA, the "accelerator"). Bacterial exRNAs coordinately suppress multiple nodes of the ABA pathway while leaving GA pathways intact or enhanced, decisively shifting this ratio.

Evidence by Crop:

- **Spinach:** Ethylene receptor (SOV3g000150.1, negative regulator → downregulation = ethylene hypersensitivity = ABA antagonism), LOX (SOV3g035520.1, cuts JA + ABA precursor supply), Phytoene synthase (SOV4g000330.1, starves ABA biosynthesis of carotenoid precursors), AHP-like (SOV4g032870.1, cytokinin hub), MYB/NAC TFs (dormancy transcriptional effectors)
- **Broccoli:** ARF repressor-type (Bo9g006190.1, ARF-ABI3 dormancy pathway), HD-ZIP TF (Bo5g151240.1, ABA-responsive), CDPK15 (Bo8g104550.1, Ca²⁺-mediated ABA signaling), PP2A-A (Bo4g174060.1, DELLA stabilizer), SBI1 (Bo8g101170.1, PP2A methylation)
- **Maize: ABI40/VP1-like (Zm00001eb197370, score 10/10)** - VP1 null mutants are viviparous (germinate on the mother plant), making this the single strongest genetic precedent for hormone-mediated germination control. NPF15/AIT1 (Zm00001eb385450, ABA transporter), HEX6 (Zm00001eb154520, glucose-ABA feedback loop)
- **Wheat:** SnRK2 kinase (TraesCS7D02G384400, ABA signal transduction - phenocopies after-ripening), ADC (TraesCS2A02G071200, polyamine-ABA balance), NAC38 (TraesCS5B02G275200, stress/dormancy TF)
- **Quinoa:** CqCNGC14 (AUR62044372, Ca²⁺ channel reducing ABA reinforcement), CqGUN4 (AUR62015391, chloroplast retrograde signaling modulating ABA)
- **Soybean:** PLDbeta1 (GLYMA_01G215100, phosphatidic acid-mediated ABA amplification), CKX3 (GLYMA_09G063900, cytokinin oxidase elevating cytokinin levels)

Why This Is Primary: (1) Present in ALL crops, (2) Supported by vivipary phenotypes (maize VP1, Arabidopsis etr1), (3) Direct, well-characterized pathway, (4) Explains the rapid germination acceleration phenotype.

C.2 Secondary MoA: Defense Downshift

Present in 5/6 crops (weak/absent only in quinoa's small dataset)

This mechanism liberates metabolic resources (ATP, NADPH, amino acids, carbon skeletons) normally reserved for pathogen defense, redirecting them toward growth.

Wheat shows the strongest defense signature: 24% of all 75 targets are defense-related (6 F-box proteins for SCF ubiquitin-mediated immune protein turnover, 5 LRR-RLKs for pattern recognition, 2 NB-LRR resistance proteins, 3 ABC transporters for defense compound export). This extraordinary enrichment suggests wheat seeds maintain exceptionally high constitutive immune surveillance that becomes a metabolic burden during germination.

Cross-species conservation: NBS-LRR genes (ETI), LRR-RLKs (PTI), and defense-associated kinases appear across all crops, indicating the growth-defense tradeoff is a universal constraint that exRNAs exploit.

C.3 Other Secondary Mechanisms

ROS/Redox Optimization (score 12/18): Creates the "oxidative window" - sufficient ROS for germination signaling without oxidative damage. Strongest in spinach (GST, peroxidase, 6-PGDH form a three-pronged ROS modulation system), wheat (PARP downregulation alone increases biomass >10% in published studies).

Metabolic Priming (score 11/18): Strongest in soybean (invertase/PME inhibitor validated across 3 species - soybean, Arabidopsis, tomato). Recalibrates T6P/SnRK1 signaling and redirects metabolic flux toward growth-essential building blocks.

C.4 Crop-Specific Mechanisms

- **Quinoa:** Betalain antioxidant pathway (Amaranthaceae-specific), HAK/KUP K⁺ transporter paradox (halophyte context), 100% Bacillus endophyte colonization (vertical transmission, co-evolved mutualism)
- **Broccoli:** WGT (whole genome triplication) buffering allows partial knockdown without loss of essential function
- **Wheat:** Hexaploidy provides similar buffering; 85% repetitive DNA makes DDM1 chromatin remodeler especially consequential
- **Soybean:** Isoflavonoid defense pathway cost (legume-specific); precedent for bacteria-to-soybean sRNA transfer (Ren et al. 2019, *Science*)

D. UNIFIED CAUSAL MODEL

Phase 0 (0-4h, Seed Soaking): Bacterial sRNAs enter seed via EPS matrix during imbibition. First targets affected: hormone transporters (NPF15 in maize), Ca²⁺ channels (CNGC in spinach/quinoa), defense receptors (LRR-RLKs across all crops).

Phase 1 (4-12h, Early Imbibition): ABA pathway suppression accelerates. DNA methyltransferase and histone modifiers downregulated (spinach, broccoli, wheat), opening pro-germination gene loci. Defense suppression prevents metabolic resource drain.

Phase 2 (12-24h, Metabolic Reactivation): ROS optimization creates signaling window. Antioxidant systems (GST, peroxidases) downregulated, allowing controlled oxidative burst. Metabolic enzymes (hexokinases, invertases) shift flux toward growth.

Phase 3 (24-72h, Radicle Emergence): Physical execution. Ion transporters drive water uptake and turgor pressure. Cell wall loosening enzymes (peroxidases, expansins) facilitate radicle protrusion. Reserve mobilization (starch, lipids, proteins) accelerates.

E. ALTERNATIVE MODELS AND DISCRIMINATING EXPERIMENTS

E.1 Alternative Models

1. **EPS Osmopriming Model:** EPS polysaccharides create controlled water potential, standard osmopriming effect. Predicts: RNase has no effect; non-biological osmotic agents (PEG) produce equivalent results.
2. **MAMP Elicitor Model:** Bacterial polysaccharides trigger defense priming/hormesis. Predicts: Heat-denatured EPS still works; effect correlates with polysaccharide concentration not RNA.
3. **PGPR/Microbiome Model:** Live bacteria produce phytohormones (IAA, cytokinins). Predicts: Filter-sterilized EPS fails; effect requires viable bacteria.
4. **Non-Specific dsRNA Model:** Foreign RNA triggers innate immune hormesis. Predicts: Scrambled dsRNA works; sequence specificity irrelevant.

E.2 The Killer Experiment: RNase Elimination Test

Protocol: Prepare M-9 EPS → split into 3 aliquots: (A) Untreated, (B) + RNase A (100 µg/mL, 37°C, 1h), (C) + heat-inactivated RNase A. Apply to seeds (n=50/treatment, 4 replicates, 3 crops). Score germination at 24, 48, 72h.

Interpretation:

- If B ~ C < A: RNA is essential → **exRNA hypothesis supported**
- If B ~ C ~ A: RNA irrelevant → **osmopriming/MAMP model supported**
- If B intermediate: Partial RNA contribution

Cost: <\$500 | **Timeline:** 2 weeks | **Decision value:** CRITICAL - go/no-go for entire research program

F. UNIVERSAL BIOMARKER PANEL

RNA-Specific Markers (should change ONLY if RNA is active)

1. **Ethylene receptor family** (negative regulator) - expect downregulation
2. **DNA methyltransferase** (MET1 family) - expect downregulation
3. **NBS-LRR resistance genes** - expect downregulation
4. **SUVR5/H3K9 methyltransferase** - expect downregulation

Treatment-Response Markers (change regardless of mechanism)

1. **ABI5/RAB18** (ABA-responsive) - expect downregulation
2. **GA3ox/GASA** (GA biosynthesis/responsive) - expect upregulation
3. **ERF1** (ethylene-responsive) - expect upregulation
4. **GST/Peroxidase** (ROS scavengers) - expect downregulation

Negative Controls

1. **Actin** - should NOT change
2. **Ubiquitin** - should NOT change

RT-qPCR Validation Strategy: Timepoints 0, 4, 8, 12, 24, 48h post-imbibition. Expected 2-5 fold changes peaking at 12-24h. GO criterion: ≥ 6 of 10 biomarkers show predicted changes.

G. MINIMAL VALIDATION ROADMAP

Tier 1: Go/No-Go (1 crop, 4 weeks, <\$2,000)

1. RNase elimination experiment
2. RT-qPCR on top 5 biomarkers
3. ABA/GA quantification (LC-MS/MS)

Decision: Proceed to Tier 2 or stop

Tier 2: Mechanistic Confirmation (2 crops, 8 weeks, <\$8,000)

1. Degradome/PARE sequencing (direct evidence of RISC cleavage)
2. sRNA-seq of EPS solution
3. AGO co-immunoprecipitation

Tier 3: Cross-Crop Translation (4+ crops, 16 weeks, <\$25,000)

1. Apply biomarker panel across all 6 crops
2. Dose-response curves
3. Synthetic sRNA mimic sufficiency test

Tier 4: Publication-Grade

1. Field trials
2. Genetic validation in mutants
3. Mechanistic dissection of each pathway

Risk Assessment Summary

- **Highest Risk:** RNA is bystander (osmoprimering is true mechanism) - RNase test mitigates
- **High Risk:** Target predictions are false positives - RT-qPCR validation mitigates
- **Medium Risk:** Effect is species-specific - cross-crop panel mitigates

Recommended Crop for First Validation

Arabidopsis (as spinach proxy) - Best genetic resources, fastest generation time, established mutant collections (met1, etr1, suvr5 available), well-characterized AGO pathway. If Arabidopsis validates, proceed to crop species.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Note: This is a consolidated bibliography from all 6 crop-specific analysis files. Full citations with DOIs extracted from source documents.

Cross-Kingdom RNAi (Universal)

- Weiberg et al. (2013) Science 342:118-123 - Fungal sRNAs hijack plant RNAi
- Cai et al. (2018) Science 360:1126-1129 - Plant-to-fungus sRNA in EVs
- He et al. (2023) Nat Commun 14:4383 - EV uptake via clathrin-mediated endocytosis
- Ren et al. (2019) Science 365:919-922 - **Bacteria-to-soybean sRNA transfer** (CRITICAL PRECEDENT)

ABA/GA Hormone Signaling (All Crops)

- Finch-Savage & Leubner-Metzger (2006) New Phytol 171:501-523
- Bleeker & Kende (2000) Ann Rev Cell Dev Biol - Ethylene receptors
- Finkelstein et al. (2008) Ann Rev Plant Biol - ABA signaling
- Suzuki et al. (2003) Plant Physiol - VP1/vivipary

Epigenetics (Spinach, Broccoli, Wheat)

- Kawakatsu et al. (2017) Genome Biol 18:171 - Dynamic DNA methylation in seeds
- Law & Jacobsen (2010) Nat Rev Genet - DNA methylation mechanisms

Defense-Growth Tradeoff (All Crops)

- Huot et al. (2014) Mol Plant 7:1267-1287 - Growth-defense balance
- Gao et al. (2024) Plant Biotechnol J 22:1198-1205 - Revisiting tradeoffs in crops

ROS Biology (All Crops)

- Bailly (2004) Seed Sci Res 14:93-107 - ROS in seed biology
- El-Maarouf-Bouteau & Bailly (2008) Plant Signal Behav - Oxidative window

Complete bibliography with 200+ unique references available in individual crop claims files.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Individual crop claims files (6 files, 425KB total)

Appendix B: Cross-crop theme matrix with detailed scoring rationale

Appendix C: Unified causal model with phase-by-phase gene citations

Appendix D: Universal biomarker panel with RT-qPCR primer designs

Appendix E: Validation audit report (data integrity verification)

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