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Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

Specialized Section on Standardization of
Early and Ware Potatoes
(24 - 25 March 2003, Geneva)

REPORT ON ITS SIXTEENTH SESSION

Executive summary :

There was no consensus on the tolerance for sizing. The value was maintained at 5%.

The delegation of Germany presented their system for potato inspection.

It was agreed to propose to the Working Party to abolish the UNECE General Conditions of Sale for Potatoes as they were no longer used in trade. It was also decided not to make reference to the RUCIP 2000 rules as there were no problems with the present situation.

The secretariat will request information on countries' national quality standards for early and ware potatoes.

Delegations reported on the status of traceability in their countries.

It was agreed to propose to the Working Party to integrate the work on early and ware potatoes into another specialized section. The majority of the delegations present recommended that the work be integrated into the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables while others preferred joining the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes. It was decided to leave the choice to the Working Party after consultation with all relevant parties.

Delegations reported on the status of the cooking type in their countries.

Opening of the session

1. The session was opened by Ms. Virginia Cram-Martos, Chief of the Trade Policy and Governmental Cooperation Branch of the UNECE Trade Development and Timber Division. She welcomed the delegations to Geneva for their 16th session. She congratulated them on the work done so far by establishing the UNECE Standards for Early and Ware Potatoes.

2. She said that following this work it was now necessary to think more about how to promote the application of the standards in the 55 member States of the UNECE and how to best service the further development of the standards.

3. She said that a number of proposals had been brought forward to the secretariat on how to reduce administrative effort while ensuring that issues concerning early and ware potatoes could be discussed whenever necessary:

- To integrate discussions in the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables.
- To hold meetings on request and in different countries in order to combine them with technical visits, promoting the implementation of the standards.
- To cooperate with the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes.

4. She mentioned that by discussing these questions the group was well in line with the request that had been made to all subsidiary bodies of UNECE: To review their structure so as to make their work more efficient and effective and to free resources for the assistance to the implementation of standards. She said that the Committee for Trade, Industry and Enterprise Development, the parent body to the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards, would undertake this work this year and any input from the group would be appreciated.

Participation

6. The session was attended by delegations of the following countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Kenya, Poland, Switzerland and Turkey. The Chairman of the UNECE Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes, Mr. G. Bianchi (Italy) also attended the session.

Item 1: Adoption of the agenda

Document: TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2003/1

7. The provisional agenda as contained in TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2003/1 was adopted with the deletion of documents TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2003/3, 4 and 5, which had not been received.

Item 2: Election of Officers

8. The chairman of the Specialized Section, Mr. Debaveye (Belgium) had informed the secretariat that he had taken on new functions and would not be able to continue attending the meeting. Following a proposal from Germany the group elected Mr. P. de Nolf (Belgium) as chairman. Ms. K. Zgorska was re-elected as vice-chairperson.

Item 3: Matters of interest arising since the fifteenth session

Document for this session: TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2003/2

9. The Specialized Section noted document TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2003/2, which sums up the relevant outcome of the fifth and sixth sessions of the Committee for Trade, Industry and Enterprise Development and the fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions of the Working Party on Standardization of Perishable Produce and Quality Development (now renamed Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards).

10. Concerning the updating of the OECD explanatory brochure for early and ware potatoes, the delegations of Poland and Belgium, who serve as rapporteurs, informed that a draft document had recently been submitted to the OECD secretariat by Poland and that further contributions from Belgium were expected within 6 -12 months.

Item 4: Review of the UNECE standards on Early and Ware Potatoes (FFV 30, 31)

Background documents: TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2001/8 (Report of the last session)
 TRADE/WP.7/2001/9/Add.9 (UNECE Standard for Early potatoes)
 TRADE/WP.7/2001/9/Add.10 (UNECE Standard for Ware potatoes)

Definition of long varieties and varieties of irregular shape

11. At the last session the standards were amended concerning the definition of long varieties and the inclusion of an indicative list of long varieties of irregular shape. There were no comments on the experience made with this definition and the list.

Tolerance for sizing

12. At the last session the tolerance for sizing was also discussed (see TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2001/8, paras. 9 to 13). The UNECE Standard sets it at 5%, which was considered difficult to reach by some delegations especially Israel, who preferred 10%. It was decided that delegations would research in their countries if the prescribed tolerances were reached and then report at this session:

Switzerland: The inter-professional trade standard maintains the tolerance at 6% (no legislation exists on this question).
France: Wants to maintain 5% in the UNECE Standard.
Germany: Agrees with 5% in the UNECE Standard. Has 4% in the national standard.
Greece: Have no legislation on this matter but apply 5% at the moment – would prefer 6% in the UNECE Standard.
Turkey: Can accept 6%.
Poland: Can agree to 6% in the UNECE Standard - has 3% for early and 2% for ware potatoes in the national standard.

13. The value in the UNECE Standards is maintained at 5% as there was no consensus for changing the current value.

Item 5: Comparison of inspection methods, sizing methods, sampling methods and control of "washed" potatoes

14. The delegation of Germany gave an oral report of their quality control system.
15. Germany has national standards for early and ware potatoes, which are mandatory for:
 - national production;
 - imports from third countries (countries outside the European Union) that are cleared by customs in Germany
 - potatoes packed in Germany.
16. Following a question from Belgium it was clarified that potatoes coming from other EU countries are not considered as imports because of the Common Market and do not have to conform to the German national standards e.g. concerning marking of the cooking type. This is also true for potatoes from third countries that have been customs cleared in another EU country. This situation could only change if a European Union marketing standard was adopted.
17. Official quality inspection is done at random. Voluntary inspection is possible by private organisms. The Federal Office for Food and Agriculture is responsible for checks at border crossings. Regional offices of the federal states perform inspections at production and wholesale level. Cities and districts are responsible for inspection on the retail level.
18. Bulk sampling of a lot is done by taking a number of packages and a number of tubers from each sampled package according to the size of the lot and the packages. There is no legislation on sampling but a national agreement on sampling.
19. The interpretation of the standards has been worked out in cooperation with production and trade. Samples are checked on quality issues and sizing. Tubers are peeled and cut. Defects that disappear through normal peeling (2-3mm depth) are not considered as defects, with the exception of rot. Tubers with defects are weighed, including the peel cut off. The percentage of defective tubers is determined.
20. 15 to 20 tubers of a bulk sample are sent to electrophoresis analysis to test if only the variety indicated is contained. If 4 or more tubers are of a different variety the lot is considered as not conform.
21. The owner is informed in writing of the result of the inspection. If the lot has been deemed not conform to the variety, sales or import are impossible. The owner may bring the lot to conformity.
22. Following a question from Belgium it was clarified that potatoes produced with organic methods have to conform to the same commercial standards.

Item 6: Revision of the UNECE General Conditions of Sale for Potatoes and review of RUCIP 2000

Discussion at the last session: TRADE/WP.7/GE.5/2001/8, paras 32-42

23. At the last session RUCIP 2000, the revision of RUCIP (Règles et Usages du Commerce Intereuropéen des Pommes de Terre et les Règlements d'Expertise et d'Arbitrage du Comité Européen), developed by EUROPATAT in cooperation with other organisations was presented in detail. It was discussed if the UNECE General Conditions of Sale for Potatoes, which were adopted in 1973 and last revised in 1979 should be kept and updated or if in some way reference should be made to the RUCIP rules. No consensus could be found at the last session. It was decided that delegations should examine the UNECE Conditions of Sale and consult with their trade to obtain a firm position for this session.

24. Most delegations present confirmed that trade in their countries used the RUCIP 2000 rules in international trade (sometimes with modifications). They also confirmed that the UNECE General Conditions of Sale for Potatoes were not used and were not considered useful anymore by the trade. No problems were reported with the present situation and no delegation saw an urgent need to update the UNECE document.

25. Therefore it was decided to propose to the Working Party to abolish the UNECE General Conditions of Sale for Potatoes.

26. The Specialized Section also decided not to make reference in the standards or on the website to the RUCIP rules as they were already well known by trade and it was felt that in order to recommend them or to reference them an in-depth study would be necessary. This effort was not considered justified because there seemed to be no problem with the current situation.

Item 7: National legislation for early and ware potatoes

27. At the last session delegations were invited to provide their national legislation to the UNECE secretariat. Information was received by Germany and Poland for the last session.

28. The delegation of Turkey said that they would send their national standard, which differed slightly from the UNECE Standards to the secretariat.

29. The delegation of France said that the trade in their country had asked for a number of modifications to the UNECE Standards in order to facilitate their application. They would send proposals for the next meeting and were interested in discussing them in an informal working group in order to prepare the meeting.

30. The secretariat will request the national legislation from the 55 member States of UNECE and other countries usually participating in the work on agricultural quality standards.

Item 8: Report on national provisions for traceability

31. At the last session it was decided that each delegation should report on its national provisions for traceability:

France: Several groups work on implementation of traceability because European Union legislation on traceability will enter into force in 2006. They said that traceability should be linked to the risk involved. They distinguish two stages of traceability, back to the packer or back to the producer. At the moment it is rare that the consumer could trace back to the producer.

Germany: According to the national standards potatoes have to be presented in pre-packages. Germany has implemented the EU legislation on pre-packages, which demands marking of packer and seller and the lot number. This already ensures a certain traceability. Producers and traders, including retail are working on a quality assurance system, which will include traceability measures but they have not been finalized. Some big producers in Germany have organised traceability in a way that is directly accessible to the consumer through the Internet where they can trace back the produce they have bought to the field where it was produced. The quality system planned will not go that far.

Greece: Greece is beginning to apply the EU 178/2002 Article 18 of the Council and Parliament on traceability. They see traceability as very important especially to trace genetically modified food or feeds. At the moment buyers can have information on the region and the country of origin but not yet on the field.

Turkey and Poland: Are harmonizing their legislation with EU law.

Switzerland: At present they have no legal definition of traceability. They are interested in it for food safety reasons and also for recalling products. They feel they have to react now because the consumer demands to have the choice between GMO food and other food. There are discussing if more legislation is needed or if the present quality assurance systems are sufficient.

Belgium: The federal agency for food safety is working on this topic. The Belgian delegation felt that provisions concerning this topic were too complicated and should be simplified. They also felt that traceability was also an important issue for quality in order to enable the consumer to repeat or avoid a choice depending on the satisfaction with a product.

Item 9: Future organisation of the work

32. There was a discussion regarding the possibility of joining the work of the group to another Specialized Section (as proposed in the introduction of the chief of section) in order to:

- discuss the standards with a larger number of countries,
- have the possibility to discuss issues on early and ware potatoes when needed.
- save travel costs for delegations.
- have positive synergetic effects with the group joined.
- save administrative effort for the secretariat.

33. All participants agreed that joining another group would be useful because the present participation and number of proposals did not justify keeping a separate regular meeting while it should still be assured that issues concerning early and ware potatoes can be discussed when needed.

34. There were varying opinions on which Specialized Section should be joined, the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes (GE.6) or the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables (GE.1):

France: In favour of joining GE.6 because the diseases discussed are the same and the quality of seed potatoes influences the quality of early and ware potatoes. They also felt that this would give that opportunity to hear the opinion of the important producer countries Canada and Russia that were represented in GE.6 but not normally in GE.1. They generally felt that early and ware potatoes were distinct from any fruit or vegetable because of being tubers and thus had more in common with seed potatoes.

Greece: In favour of joining GE.6 because of the same diseases discussed and the possibility that imported early and ware potatoes could spread diseases through washing.

- Germany:* In favour of joining GE.1 because the delegates and the layout of the standards are the same. There would be savings for member countries and the secretariat. Many countries participate in the work of GE.1. Present delegations to GE.6 will most likely not be in a position to discuss quality standards for early and ware potatoes. The spread of diseases is not the task of the UNECE groups as this is done in other organisations.
- Turkey:* In favour of joining GE.1 because the delegates and the layout of the standards are the same.
- Poland:* In favour of joining GE.1 because the standards deal more with commercial quality and not with diseases as the standard for seed potatoes.
- Switzerland:* Could understand the arguments of both sides but felt that the standards were closer to the fresh fruit and vegetables standards and was therefore in favour of joining GE.1.
- Belgium:* In favour of joining GE.1 because the standards are closer and the delegates are the same.

35. As there was no consensus on which group to join, the Specialized Section decided as follows:

- The members of the Specialized Sections GE.1 and GE.6 will be asked
 - if they are prepared to accept to integrate the work of GE.5,
 - if they are able to do so with the existing delegates and
 - if there is interest among the existing delegates to discuss GE.5 issues in their group.
- The secretariat will send a questionnaire to all UNECE missions as well as other countries that have participated in the work of the Working Party asking for their opinion in this question.
- The information received will be consolidated by the secretariat and presented to the Working Party.
- The Specialized Section on Standardization of Early and Ware Potatoes proposes to the Working Party to join another Specialized Section. It asks the Working Party to decide if it should join GE.1 or GE.6.
- If there is no consensus on this question in the Working Party the next meeting of GE.5 will be scheduled by the secretariat for March 2005 but it will only be held if the secretariat receives at least one written proposal for amendments to the standards at least 12 weeks before the planned meeting. If no proposal is received for 2005, the next meeting will be scheduled by the secretariat as soon as at least one proposal is received.

Item 10: Preparation of the next session

(a) Future work

36. France will send a proposal concerning the alignment of the UNECE Standard with national standards.

37. Belgium will send a proposal concerning mixed packaging of potatoes with different skin color but the same cooking type.

(b) Date and place of the next session

38. A tentative date will be scheduled by the secretariat after the session of the Working Party in accordance with the decisions taken there.

(c) Preparation of the 59th session of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

39. The secretariat will communicate to the Working Party the proposal of the Specialized Section to abolish the UNECE General Conditions of Sale for Potatoes. The information concerning future organization of the work of the group will also be communicate to the working party in accordance with para. 34.

Item 11: Other business

Cooking type

40. At the last session the discussion on a possible harmonization of the definition and indication of the cooking type had been concluded without a consensus (see TRADE/WP.7/GE.6/2001/8, paras 14-17).

41. The Chairman asked if the cooking type had to be indicated when registering a new variety:

Germany: If breeders want to register a new variety in Germany they have to indicate the cooking type. There is a national method how to determine the cooking type. Research is going on in cooperation with Switzerland for a new method to determine the cooking type, looking also at splitting after cooking, firmness of the flesh and humidity of cooked potatoes. The research looks at a large number of varieties and different growing areas. It is hoped that the new method can become part of the commercial standards.

Poland: The cooking type is indicated in the registration list of varieties. The international method from EAPR (European Association for Potato Research) is used to define the cooking type. This method is also used in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic.

France: Has a catalogue of varieties indicating the cooking type. CNIPT (Commission Nationale Interprofessionel de la Pomme de Terre) already has a method but is continuing research on determining the cooking type.

Belgium: Expressed the hope that one day it would be possible to come to harmonized descriptions and believes that this information should be mandatory as it is important for the consumer.

Switzerland: In Switzerland there is no selection of new varieties. Switzerland recognizes the catalogue of the European Union. In this catalogue the cooking type is not indicated.

Italy: The classification is recorded but not mandatory for registration.

Kenya: The cooking type is required. It should be defined at the breeding and release stage.

Mixtures of different varieties of potatoes

42. The delegation of Belgium reported that in Belgium sales packages may contain potatoes of different skin colours (e.g. red and black) but of the same cooking type. He said this was done to promote the use of potatoes as a vegetable. He asked if this practice would be allowed in other countries.

43. No other delegation had any experience with this kind of marketing. In many other countries it would not be legal. Many could not see the advantage of these packages, as the different colours would disappear after peeling.

Item 12: Adoption of the report

44. The Specialized Section adopted the report on its sixteenth session on the basis of a draft prepared by the secretariat.