



**Economic and Social  
Council**

Distr.  
GENERAL

TRADE/WP.7/GE.6/2000/4  
22 November 1999

ORIGINAL : ENGLISH

---

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE

COMMITTEE FOR TRADE, INDUSTRY AND  
ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

Working Party on Standardization of  
Perishable Produce and Quality Development

Specialized Section on Standardization of  
Seed Potatoes

31 January -3 February 2000, Geneva

Item 3 of the Provisional Agenda

**Report of the Meeting of Rapporteurs on Standardization of Seed Potatoes  
Milan, 27 to 29 September 1999**

**Opening of the session**

1. The meeting was held from 27 to 29 September 1999 in Milan on the invitation of the Vice-Chairman of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes, Mr. Giacomo Bianchi and kindly hosted by Ente Nazionale Sementi Elette. The meeting was opened by Mr. Giuseppe Merisio, General Manager of Ente Nazionale Sementi Elette who welcomed the delegates to Milan and wished them a productive meeting.

2. The meeting was attended by the following rapporteurs: Canada (Chair), France, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the European Commission. The meeting was also attended by the following observers: Hungary, Ireland, USA (Oregon), Switzerland and Uruguay. The UN/ECE Secretariat was also present.

## **Status of the revised UN/ECE Standard for Seed Potatoes and its promotion**

### *Questions asked to the UN/ECE secretariat*

3. At the meeting of rapporteurs in Seattle there had been considerable discussion on the legal status of the Standard and the role of Standard in trade in relation to other organisations, eg, WTO. A discussion paper had been forwarded to the ECE Secretariat for response.

4. The first question asked was whether the fact that a country had accepted the UN/ECE standard created a legal obligation that could eventually be enforced. The UN/ECE secretariat replied that UN/ECE standards were voluntary standards. The Geneva Protocol only recommends that countries align their national legislation to the UN/ECE standards.

5. The second question concerned resolution of a trade dispute concerning seed potatoes. The rapporteurs asked if in any seed potato TBT (Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement) dispute arising between WTO (World Trade Organization) member countries, the UN/ECE Standard for Seed Potatoes as a relevant international standard might be taken into account. The UN/ECE secretariat replied that this would depend on the procedures for dispute settlement used by WTO and on the specific case. If the standard was taken into account then usually a technical expert group would be formed by WTO to give advice on the matter.

6. The UN/ECE secretariat proposed to the rapporteurs to submit a hypothetical case to WTO. It was suggested that this case should not be submitted to a specific WTO committee but to WTO in general to find out in which areas the UN/ECE standard was considered as relevant.

7. The third question concerned the interpretation of Part II, Subpart E of the standard. It was asked in particular whether countries had the right to impose stricter measures also for regulated non-quarantine pests or only for those mentioned in Annexes II and V. The UN/ECE secretariat replied that the drafting of Subpart E was not clear and should be reviewed at the next meeting of the Specialized Section. It is the opinion of the secretariat that the UN/ECE standard does not intend to restrict countries rights in this matter.

### *Future role of the UN/ECE standard*

8. As at the last meeting the Rapporteurs discussed in depth what function the UN/ECE standard should have in the future taking into account the development of standards relative to seed potatoes in other organisations (WTO, IPPC, EPPO, NAPPO).

9. Some rapporteurs felt that at this and the previous meeting political questions had taken too much room in the discussions while technical questions for which the group had been elected had been neglected. Others felt that because of the developments in other international institutions was important to redefine the framework in which the group was working.

10. The chairman gave an overview over the developments since 1995 which affect the UN/ECE standard:
- 1995: The WTO-SPS agreement entered into force. This agreement encourages the use of international standards, guidelines and recommendations developed by the relevant international organisations, including the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the International Office of Epizootics, and the relevant international and regional organisations operating in the framework of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC).
  - The IPPC Secretariat was subsequently asked to set up a Commission on Phytosanitary measures and to develop standards.
  - 1997: The revised IPPC was approved by the FAO conference but has not yet entered into force (it will do so once two-thirds of the signatory countries have formally indicated their acceptance - this process took 12 years for the last revision).
11. According to the convention individual countries justify with a pest risk assessment which pests they consider as *quarantine pests*. These are pests of potential economic importance to the area endangered thereby and not yet present there (A1 pest), or present but not widely distributed and being officially controlled (A2 pest).
12. The revised convention also contains a definition of *regulated non-quarantine pests*. These are non-quarantine pests whose presence in plants for planting affects the intended use of those plants with an economically unacceptable impact and which are therefore regulated within the territory of the importing contracting party.
13. *Quarantine pests* and *regulated non-quarantine pests* together constitute the *regulated pests* for which an importing country may require *phytosanitary measures*, provided that such measures are:
- (a) no more stringent than measures applied to the same pests, if present within the territory of the importing contracting party; and
  - (b) limited to what is necessary to protect plant health and/or safeguard the intended use and can be technically justified by the contracting party concerned.
14. The Chairman stated that seed potato certification programmes are important *phytosanitary measures* for regulating pests and for the creation of pest free areas and should therefore be considered as an important pest risk mitigation method. The chairman said that to his knowledge the UN/ECE forum was the only global forum for discussing and harmonising certification programmes and felt that it was important to preserve this forum. To expand on characteristics of certification schemes might therefore be an important future task for the standard.
15. The Chairman suggested that the UN/ECE group could try to get IPPC recognition as the body responsible for standardization of certification programs. This could be done by first contacting the regional plant protection organizations who are recognized and report to IPPC. As an example he cited the draft EPPO Certification Scheme for Seed Potatoes which refers to the UN/ECE standard. The NAPPO potato standard recognizes Seed Potato Certification as an important pest risk mitigation measure but the Standard makes no reference to the UN/ECE.

16. Some delegations said that they preferred to approach IPPC directly instead of going through the regional organizations.

17. The group agreed that certification schemes were important to achieve agreement on the quality of seed potatoes (components of quality: plant health, genetic components, external quality). It was also mentioned that in order to have confidence in a certification program it was important to know the methods for classification, sampling and analytical methods used.

18. The rapporteurs agreed to suggest to the Specialized Section that in 2000 the rapporteurs should meet with EPPO, NAPPO and IPPC to discuss these questions.

19. It was also suggested that the group should identify objectives for its work:

- long term objectives: e.g. create a model scheme of integrated quality of seed potatoes in international trade.
- short term objectives: e.g. get more information from the trade; identify areas of quality of seed potatoes which would benefit from further standardization (yield, varietal purity, classification, homogeneity of the seed lot etc.)

### **Powdery scab tolerances**

20. At the last session, the Rapporteurs had discussed the tolerances for the inclusion of powdery scab into the standard. The Rapporteurs had accepted a proposed tolerance for pre-basic seed of 1% of tubers with a surface area affected of >10%. No consensus had been found for the tolerances for basic/certified seed.

21. The rapporteurs from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom had prepared a technical background paper on this question and proposed to justify why in their opinion a lower tolerance than 1% for pre-basic seed would not be realistic and proposed a tolerance of 3 % of tubers with a surface area affected of >10%.

22. After a lengthy discussion it was agreed to propose to the Specialized Section to insert the following paragraph into Annex IV, A.:

“Powdery scab: Tubers affected over a specified per cent of their surface

- |   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| - pre-basic (> 10% surface cover)           | 1 per cent by weight  |
| - basic and certified (> 10% surface cover) | 3 per cent by weight” |

### **Virus Tolerances in Direct Progeny of Basic and Certified Potatoes**

23. The rapporteurs agreed to propose to the Specialized Section to amend Annex V 2. (b) to read as follows:

“(b) The proportion, in direct progeny, of plants showing symptoms of mild or severe virus disease should not exceed 4 per cent with not more than 2 % showing severe virus disease”.

24. The tolerances for certified seed were again discussed at length..

25. It was stated by the importing countries that they did not understand the reluctance of the exporters to reduce this tolerance because in effect in most seed lots marketed as certified seed, virus levels are normally found to be much lower than the proposed standard.

26. Some delegates supported lower tolerances because they were concerned with the synergetic effects between certain mild and severe viruses.

27. It was said by exporting countries that even though this might be the case one had to consider that Certified seed was intended to be used for the production of table stock and not for further propagation so a tolerance of 10 % was acceptable and this stock could still find a market in certain areas.

28. In the discussion there was considerable difference in opinion between importing and exporting countries as to what is meant by having a "minimum standard". The two extreme positions can be summarized as follows:

- A minimum standard defines the baseline - the lowest quality that can find a market somewhere in the world, taking into account also "bad years" (years in which weather conditions make it more difficult to meet strict tolerances for pests).
- A minimum standard sets the strictest limits for which a wide consensus can be found. Trade should in most cases be possible within the standard (exceptions should be made for "bad years"). The standard should give signals to the trade to show what is acceptable in the market.

29. It was suggested by some delegates to solve the problem by creating sub-divisions to classes but it was said by others that this had been suggested and rejected before. It was agreed to discuss this matter again at the Specialized Section in Geneva.

30. It was finally agreed to propose to the Specialized Section to amend Annex V 3. (b) to read as follows:

- “(b) The proportion in direct progeny of plants showing symptoms of mild or severe virus disease should not exceed 10 per cent. Mild mosaics merely causing discolouration and no leaf deformation should be ignored.”

### **Questionnaire on National Certification Schemes for Seed Potatoes**

31. The rapporteurs agreed that the UN/ECE publication on National Certification Schemes for Seed Potatoes should be updated. The publication was seen as a useful tool to promote the UN/ECE standard and the work of the group. The rapporteurs will send comments to the secretariat and the delegates from France, Italy and Switzerland will meet in Geneva before the end of 1999 to finalise the questionnaire. It was also agreed that countries should not only answer the questions but also provide a detailed outline of their certification scheme including the legislative authority and regulations.

### **Routine Procedures for Sampling Seed Potatoes**

32. The rapporteurs from the Netherlands and France will present to the Specialized Section the document they handed out at the last rapporteurs meeting with an additional explanation.

### **Laboratory Accreditation**

33. The Rapporteurs discussed the question whether test results obtained by “accredited” laboratories can be considered “official” and the procedures used for accreditation. Several delegates provided information on how this question was dealt with in their countries and how they see the future developments:

34. *Canada:* Accreditation for private laboratories for national purposes is done. Even seed potato companies with a lab are permitted to do the tests and governments will be monitoring and no longer be responsible for the testing. The key requirement is that all accredited labs have a quality assurance system in place that can be audited by the Government.

35. *Hungary:* Has central accreditation.

36. *Israel:* Laboratories are accredited to do tests on brown rot. It is expected that plant protection will be done by private organisations in the future.

37. *USA/Oregon:* Private laboratories are doing tests now. USDA/APHIS (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service) takes on the responsibility for accreditation. Each state designates an authority - many of those are private depending on the complexity.

38. *Switzerland:* The most important thing in accreditation is that the confidence remains; the auditing has to be efficient. Swiss companies tend to be too small to have their own laboratories but it would still be good to have accredited sampling to be able to do sampling in the flow of the production process.

39. The observer from Switzerland gave information on how the OECD Seed Scheme deals with this matter. This year an experiment was held in 15 volunteer countries who delegated authority and the results were compared. At the end of this year it will be integrated into the scheme to allow accredited firms to make the field inspection. The next step will be to look at sampling and analysis and the accreditation of company laboratories.

### **Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO's)**

40. The group discussed whether it should deal with GMO or not. Some delegates felt that GMO were not a certification issue others felt that this question should be discussed together with other aspects of quality and it could then be decided whether to include provisions in the standard.

41. The observer from Switzerland in his capacity as chairman of the OECD Seed Scheme gave information on the discussions held in that forum. There have been two meetings of the Scheme since the World Seed Conference. A mandate has been given to the scheme to examine the effects of GMO. In this connection FIS (Fédération Internationale de Semence) started an initiative to create a system of quality inspection ran by the industry but supervised by FIS and the OECD Seed Scheme. The question of GMO is also a question of varietal purity. The role of the seed scheme in this area is to define thresholds and be objective and not to evaluate the danger.

42. The observer from Switzerland offered to prepare a discussion document on this question for the next session. It was also agreed that the OECD Scheme and the UN/ECE Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes should remain in close contact.

### **Preparation and agenda of the Specialized Section**

43. The Rapporteurs identified the following tasks to be done in preparation of or during the Specialized Section:

- Creation of a hypothetical case to be transmitted WTO (Secretariat + Rapporteurs)
- Completion of the questionnaire on Certification schemes (Secretariat + Rapporteurs)
- Invite trade e.g. Europatat and others to participate (Secretariat)
- Prepare a discussion paper on GMO (Switzerland)
- Document on Routine Procedures for Sampling Seed Potatoes (Netherlands, France)
- Provide NAPPO standard on laboratory accreditation (United States, Canada)
- Review of Part II, Subpart E (Specialized Section)
- Decision on tolerances for powdery scab (Specialized Section)
- Decision on virus tolerances in direct progeny of basic and certified potatoes (Specialized Section)
- Establish Long term objectives (Specialized Section)
- Establish Short term objectives (Specialized Section)
- Discussion on Introduction of sub-divisions in the categories (Specialized Section)
- Discussion on areas of certification schemes which might benefit from further standardization (Specialized Section)
- Prepare for a meeting of the Rapporteurs with EPPO, NAPPO and IPPC (Specialized Section).

### **Closing of the session**

44. The Chairman closed the meeting by thanking the Ente Nazionale Sementi Elette for the invitation and efficient organisation of the meeting. He also expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to meet with representatives of the Italian potato trade and for the organisation of the very interesting excursion.

45. This report was prepared after the session by the secretariat and sent out to the rapporteurs for comments.

---