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Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

Sixty-third session

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Item 9 of the provisional agenda

**Workshop on International Commercial Quality Standards for
Agricultural Produce**

Ispica, Sicily, 24-26 September 2007

1. The Sicilian Regional Ministry of Agriculture, Trade Point Ragusa and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) held a three-day practical workshop in the southernmost part of Sicily to promote those UNECE and European Commission commercial quality standards for agricultural products that have high export potential for that region. The main purpose of the Workshop was to explain to local growers and traders how the standards are interpreted in the market-place in the countries to which Sicilian produce is exported.

2. The Workshop focused on the following products: table grapes, peaches and nectarines, tomatoes, sweet peppers and squash (zucchini/courgettes). Experts from the largest export markets for Sicilian produce - Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom - presented the standards and also led the discussion. More general presentations explained the international framework for developing commercial quality standards (UNECE), the enforcement of standards in EU countries (Italian Ministry of Agriculture), the use of quality standards in Sweden and the national inspection service in Germany. The event attracted around one hundred persons, the composition of the audience changing according to the subject or product discussed.

3. The Regional Ministry of Agriculture (Regione Siciliana, Assessorato Agricoltura e Foreste, Servizi allo Sviluppo) financed the Workshop, and the Centre for Analyses and Services for Certification in Agriculture (A.S.C.A. – Analisi e Servizi per la Certificazione in Agricoltura) provided the meeting facilities and simultaneous interpretation. The programme of the Workshop, the texts of the standards and all presentations were translated into Italian, making communication easy and effective.

4. Samples of products cultivated locally were used to discuss the application of the standards. First, experts presented the standards and explained the main problems that they have with the products received in their countries. Then participants were invited to examine the exhibited samples, take notes and assign a quality category to the products. There followed a general discussion of the defects and classification of the products. To assist the discussion, photographs of sampled fruit were projected on the screen.

5. Exported products are often rejected for reasons unrelated to their intrinsic quality, such as marking, sizing, careless picking and handling, minor skin defects that result in rotting during long-distance transportation. Almost no additional investment is needed for careful picking (e.g. for cutting sweet peppers rather than pulling them off), packaging, correct marking and putting produce into cold storage immediately after harvesting. Just by paying more attention to these details, growers and traders could reduce their losses and increase their income.

6. It is not always easy to determine whether discolouration of fruit, for example tomatoes, is caused by viruses or is due to other factors. If it is the result of a virus, then discolouration is a sign of disease and, according to the standard, the fruit affected can be accepted in Class II under the 10 per cent tolerance limit only. If discolouration is not caused by a virus, then the fruit is allowed in Class II. The definition of colour defects in

the standard could be expanded to cover those caused by viruses. However, it might be difficult to sell a box containing too many discoloured pieces of fruit.

7. Production of fruit and vegetables in Sicily is influenced by the preferences of local consumers, who favour big and colourful fruit. In export markets, however, consumers may prefer smaller fruit or more even colouring. Growers and exporters should avoid sending unripe fruit, for example peaches, early in the season because that may spoil the market. Consumers who buy the product are disappointed with it and then refrain from buying it again, at least for some time. Peaches in Sicily are harvested after their colour has turned from yellow to red. Nectarines are picked at an earlier stage of maturity, as they can be kept in cold storage and can afterwards mature normally.

8. In Sicily, perception of quality of fresh fruit and vegetables is different from that implied in commercial quality standards. Consumers are mainly interested in the intrinsic taste-related characteristics of quality, caring less about uniformity, presentation and other requirements of the standards. However, it is difficult, if indeed possible at all, to reflect in a standard an agreed definition and measurements of “tastiness” of the product concerned. A fruit aroma may be composed of dozens of aromatic acids, which are practically impossible to measure in their entirety. To complicate the situation, taste is a very personal perception. UNECE standards define the minimum ripeness that guarantees the edibility of fruit.

9. Fruit producers who benefit from growing conditions that allow them to deliver fruit that is ripe and tasty – in addition to meeting the standard requirements of careful picking, transport, labeling and presentation – may well succeed in influencing consumers to select their produce in preference to other producers' goods and thereby increase both sales and profit. Leaflets that explain how the favourable growing conditions result in fruit with exceptional taste may also help in boosting sales.

10. Producers shared their concern about supermarkets imposing their own commercial quality requirements, usually stricter than those in the standards. Meeting these requirements, differing across supermarkets and countries, is very costly for producers. However, compliance with customers' demands is the basis for long-lasting and economically interesting contracts.

11. The expertise of local growers would be very much welcome at the meetings of the specialized sections in Geneva. Producers, packers and traders can participate in Geneva meetings as part of their official national delegation. Standards are drawn up using inputs from producers and they are meant to help growers, packers and traders to compete at the same minimum quality levels on equal ground.

12. The Trade Point Ragusa and the Regional Ministry of Agriculture expressed interest in organizing a wider, Euro-Mediterranean workshop on agricultural quality standards in 2008.