



# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
20 September 2016

Original: English

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## Economic Commission for Europe

### Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards

### Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

#### Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes

#### Forty-third session

Geneva, 31 August (p.m.) – 2 September 2016

## Report of the session

### I. Introduction

1. The meeting of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes was chaired by Mr. John Kerr (United Kingdom). The Chief of the Market Access Section of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Mr. Mika Vepsäläinen, opened the meeting stressing the importance of the work done by the Specialized Section. He thanked all regular and new delegates for their attendance and support, noting the strong commitment of the group to keeping the standard updated and producing much valued guidance material related to the standard and its use. He highlighted the need for standards to continue responding to the needs of traders and consumers, and stressed that this work needed to be brought to the attention of United Nations member States. He also explained that as a Specialized Section under the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (WP.7), its regular sessions had to be held (once a year or at an alternatively defined pace) in Geneva. Technical, informal meetings could be organized as rapporteurs' meetings at other locations but owing to a lack of funds these could not be supported by the secretariat.

2. He also stressed that all Specialized Sections' work needed to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by member States last year as two of the goals had an explicit reference to food security, sustainable agriculture and responsible consumption patterns. In the area covered by this Specialized Section those SDGs were at the core of the work; they just needed to be highlighted.

### II. Attendance

3. Representatives of the following countries attended the meeting: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Netherlands,

Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America.

### **III. Adoption of the agenda**

4. The delegations adopted the provisional agenda with proposed changes.

### **IV. Matters arising since the last session**

5. The Chief of the Market Access Section presented developments arising from the United Nations General Assembly having an impact on the work of the Specialized Section, particularly the budget and programme discussions held at the United Nations in New York in the past months. He noted that normative work done by UNECE including UNECE's agricultural quality standards had become the focus of attention. While the General Assembly did not take a final decision on the issue of standard-setting, the allocation of resources will probably arise again in future budget and program discussions. He suggested that delegations consider contacting their Permanent Missions at the United Nations New York office for support.

6. The secretariat also briefly reviewed the 2015 Working Party session, and is conference on Traceability of Agricultural Produce. This year's conference on 10 November 2016 (held in conjunction with the Working Party session) will focus on Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Sustainable consumption and production patterns) and, more particularly, on the reduction of food loss and waste and its link to standards.

### **V. Information on the Bureau and Rapporteurs' meetings held in 2015 and 2016**

7. The Specialized Section reviewed and agreed to the proposed changes from the Rapporteurs meeting held in Oulu, Finland, as well as changes proposed at the Specialized Section meeting to the Seed Potato Standard, namely:

- Annex VII (Definition of non-regulated pests) of the i.e. new definitions for "crop", "lot", "origin" and "virus diseases" and removal of the sections on mild virus diseases, and severe virus diseases (included in document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.6/2016/3); and
- Annex II B (2. Level and timing of inspection). The proposed reference ("..Table YY in Annex IX provides guidance on the number of plants to sample and maximum allowable number of each fault in each sample size ") to a new table to be added in Annex IX on sampling would be delayed until the table had been developed.

8. The revised standard will be submitted for adoption to the November 2016 session of the Working Party.

### **VI. PCR (polymerase chain reaction) techniques for virus testing**

9. The Rapporteur (Finland) briefly explained the background of this survey which had been drafted with the input from the delegations of Australia, the Czech Republic, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and reviewed at the South Africa rapporteurs meeting. It was agreed to keep the focus broad, i.e. on virus testing in general and not only PCR

(polymerase chain reaction) techniques. The Specialized Section agreed to the purpose as stated in the current draft (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.6/2016/INF.3) and added a definition of the target audience (the authority responsible for seed certification in liaison with testing services/laboratories).

10. The Specialized Section reviewed in detail the survey and adopted several changes which are reflected in the updated document. The Rapporteur's group will check the survey to make sure it is the final draft which will then be circulated via the secretariat's list server and the updated list of Designated Authorities.

## **VII. Guide to Seed Potato Tuber Inspection**

11. The Chairman noted that the Guide had been finalized at the Rapporteurs meeting in South Africa. The Specialized Section reviewed the draft and introduced editorial changes as well as amendments proposed by the delegations of France and Israel (and reviewed by an informal working group).

12. The Specialized Section decided to submit the revised draft with the approved amendments for adoption by the Working Party in November 2016, and subsequent publishing.

## **VIII. Guide to Operating a Seed Potato Certification Service**

13. The Chairman explained that this Guide had been finalized at the Rapporteurs meeting in South Africa. The Specialized Section introduced editorial changes as well as some amendments.

14. The Specialized Section decided to submit the revised draft with the approved amendments for adoption by the Working Party in November 2016, and subsequent publishing.

## **IX. Guide on tissue culture and minituber production**

15. The delegate from Australia explained the background for the proposed development of the new Guide which appeared to be in logical sequence in line with the Specialized Sections' other Guides. In a written statement to the meeting, the Potato Section (SPO) of the European Seed Association (ESA) had expressed their disagreement with the proposal. Lengthy discussion took place on the need and the value-added of such a guide when, as several delegations pointed out, there was a regulatory basis (e.g. International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures (ISPM) 33 or European legislation) which provided guidance in this area. Other delegations noted the gaps in the available regulations e.g. in the area of traceability. They considered that there was a need to study the issue further and approach it from the point of view of certification agencies. This might eventually lead to a change of title, focus and target audience (certification agencies) to avoid overlap with existing material. In addition, it was pointed out that while ISPM covered phytosanitary systems in international trade, internal markets could need more guidance and a broader discussion of the subject.

16. The Specialized Section agreed that it would be useful if countries provided an overview of how their agencies had organized the certification of companies producing minitubers. The Specialized Section therefore invited delegations to send to the coordinators of this project (Australia, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom) existing practices and national guidelines. The delegate from Australia

offered to set up a collaborative site (to be communicated via the secretariat). Delegations will be able to share their contributions until 1 January 2017 to give the Rapporteurs enough time to analyse the material, extract the main points and present the findings at the next session in March 2017.

## **X. Survey of bacterial testing methodologies**

17. The Specialized Section discussed the need for a survey of bacterial testing methodologies similar to the one on virus testing techniques. While the proposal was considered very interesting, delegates felt that it was better to postpone the development of this survey until completion of the survey on virus testing techniques. In addition, the development of the survey should also take into account discussions on the revision of the position of the Specialized Section on blackleg which should be included in the 2017 agenda of the Specialized Section.

## **XI. Risk-based inspections**

18. The Rapporteur from the Netherlands outlined the information contained in the document on risk-based inspections. He noted that one of the aims of risk-based inspection was easing or redistributing the financial burden on farmers who have to pay for seed certification. In that regard he mentioned that the introduction of PCR methods - while initially expensive - had led to an important rationalization of the testing process and, hence, to savings.

19. Currently every seed lot has to be inspected on the basis of a defined sampling method to comply with the relevant International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and EU plant health legislation. This made the use of risk-based inspection very complicated. However, he also pointed to the differences between farmers/producers, in terms of having quality assurance systems in place; keeping accurate records; and having good or bad compliance histories. In the future, those could be criteria used to determine the frequency of inspections and the fee structure imposed on farmers/producers. It could also lead to accreditation schemes for companies or even individual growers, as is already the case in Australia. Owing to the large distances in that country, certification services could not cover the whole territory at all times. Accreditations had therefore been introduced on the basis of previous inspection results.

20. The main challenge, the delegate from the Netherlands said, was how to reduce the intensity and frequency of inspections while complying with existing legislation. The discussion paper outlined some of these options such as accreditation, categorization of producers on the basis of certain criteria; and minimum inspection schemes. The latter option not only reduced the inspection intensity but also gave a financial incentive to those farmers who kept their own records and entered them accurately into the official database. Training would also be part of the programme. The outcome of the discussions in the Netherlands would show whether the information technology part of the latter option was too heavy a burden compared to the financial advantage.

21. The delegate from France noted that producers could also be motivated to comply with requirements through time gains linked to risk-based inspections which, in France, was already used for other seeds.

22. The Specialized section decided to keep this item as work in progress and the delegate from the Netherlands was invited to update the Section on the discussions in his country. Other delegations including Australia and the United Kingdom offered to provide information on their experiences at the next session in 2017.

## **XII. Sample sizes**

23. The Chair informed delegates that the draft table for field inspection sample sizes had been updated but required further work and statistical analysis. He and the delegation from New Zealand would provide an updated table at the next session; an advance copy would be circulated by the secretariat in the coming months.

## **XIII. Survey of national certification schemes for seed potatoes**

24. The delegate from Germany presented delegates the overview the table on the comparison between European Union (EU) directives and national regulations which she had compiled and, to which, all but three of the EU member states had replied. The United States delegation had prepared a draft sample survey of national certification schemes for seed potatoes. As the EU overview table already contained EU-relevant data, it was decided to use this table as the basis and add a column (first column from the left) for the UNECE Standard. The question of data publication would be clarified with the European Seed Certification Agencies Association (ESCAA).

25. Prior to the next session and the preparation of the new table, the secretariat - with input from delegations - would update the list of Designated Authorities. The secretariat will send out a request for updates and asked delegates to provide contacts.

## **XIV. True potato seed**

26. The delegate from the Netherlands introduced the document and outlined the complex issues linked to true potato seed (TPS) breeding and marketing in the European Union. He noted that an EU working group was currently working on a protocol for an experiment which would cover the marketing of TPS seedlings and the tubers from first and maybe the second tuber generations. It does not include TPS, as the EU's legal provisions did not cover TPS. The breeding companies which work on hybrid varieties, he explained, would like to develop varieties which met the protocols of the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) and currently some varieties were in distinctness, uniformity and stability (DUS) testing. However, so far no conclusion was possible as to the homogeneity of the material tested.

27. At the moment, he said, material could only be marketed on an experimental basis and exchanged between breeders. Companies, however, would like to market TPS and other generation of tubers. Eventually, that could lead to a change of the EU regulations. He also pointed out that at the moment the UNECE standard did not cover TPS.

28. The Specialized Section decided to continue observing developments in this area and place the topic on the agenda of the 2017 session.

## **XV. Promotion and capacity-building**

29. The Specialized Section discussed possible capacity-building in East Africa and the delegate from the United States updated the section on recent developments. The Chairman noted that ESA SPO in a communication indicated their interest in contributing to the workshop - should such an event be organized. The Netherlands mentioned that the United Republic of Tanzania could also be interested in a workshop. The lack of funds and communication had not yet led to concrete projects.

30. The Chairman briefly presented the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Seed Scheme's capacity-building brochure and proposed that the Specialized Section prepare a similar UNECE information leaflet presenting their capacity-building skills to help countries develop their seed potato certification schemes and inspection procedures. The delegation of Italy mentioned that the capacity-building brochure had raised a lot of interest in the OECD Scheme - particularly by new member countries as well as developing countries. The Specialized Section decided to work on a first UNECE draft leaflet which would be prepared by the delegations of the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, , and reviewed at the 2017 session of the Specialized Section.

31. Further promotional tools discussed included education videos (similar to the one presented by Belgium and available on their web site and YouTube; the development of an earlier proposed App (Australia) on the disease guide which still requires funding to be raised; e-publications and posters; or the development of a seed potato-specific Wikipedia-like site as a user-driven tool.

32. The Specialized Section stressed that Rapporteurs meetings continued to be a good way of outreach and promotion of the UNECE's standard and guidance material. Further occasions included the European and World Potato Fairs and congresses. In this regard, the possibility of holding an event at the World Potato Congress in Peru would be considered once exact dates were made public. The secretariat suggested organizing an event at the 2018 session of the Specialized Section to showcase the Section's work and impact (with a focus on SDGs).

33. The Specialized Section decided to develop a poster to show how its work was aligned and fed into reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. A first draft would be presented in the coming months by the delegation from Australia and the secretariat. It was also proposed that the Chair present the idea of preparing a poster outlining the value of the Specialized Sections to the SDGs.

## **XVI. Food loss/waste and standards**

34. The secretariat informed delegates about ongoing and new work on food loss and food waste - particularly by the Specialized Section on Fresh Fruit and Vegetables. It also noted the 10 November conference which focused on this subject and invited contributions from the Section. The Specialized Section emphasized that the approach should be two-fold: firstly, the Specialized Section could reflect on what could be done with the seed potatoes that did not meet the certification requirements; and, secondly, and more importantly, it should be stressed that selecting only those seed potatoes that met the requirements did not mean wasting produce; rather, eliminating poorer quality material from the multiplication chain safeguards the next generation of the crop thereby protecting the yield and quality of the final production generation (i.e. consumption potatoes). If good quality was kept from the beginning, then less waste occurred further up in the production chain. The standard was therefore considered a way of limiting waste by maintaining good quality.

35. The Chair was therefore invited to report to the WP.7 session and its Conference that the seed potato standard was a standard that did not increase waste. It was also decided to invite the delegations of France, Israel, Italy (Rapporteur), the Netherlands and the United States, to draft a paper on possible use of seed potatoes that did not meet certification

requirements as well as the effects of the seed potato standard on the progeny and the potato production chain<sup>1</sup>.

## **XVII. Future work**

36. The Specialized Section decided to include the following items on its 2017 agenda:
- Guide on minituber production (coordinated by, Australia the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United Kingdom)
  - Survey on virus testing with a presentation of virus testing methods (at the next Rapporteurs meeting or in Switzerland during the next session)
  - Survey of bacterial testing methodologies
  - Review of the Specialized Section's statement on blackleg
  - Review of risk-based inspections
  - Sampling for lots - including a review of the Standard and its annexes
  - Sample sizes
  - National certification schemes
  - True potato seeds
  - Food loss and waste
  - Poster outlining how the work of the Specialized Section was aligned to and impacted achieving the SDGs
  - Promotion and capacity-building: including review of the information leaflet on capacity-building; raising funds for capacity-building and publishing of guides

## **XVIII. Other business**

37. The Netherlands invited the Specialized Section to an informal Rapporteurs meeting in the Netherlands in September 2017. The delegations of France and Germany noted that further informal Rapporteurs meeting could be held in their countries in 2018. A further possible venue for an informal Rapporteurs meeting could be the World Potato Congress in Peru once the final dates were set. In addition, there remained a possible invitation for an informal meeting in New Zealand.

## **XIX. Election of officers**

38. The Specialized Section elected Mr. John Kerr (United Kingdom) as Chair, and Ms. Hanna Kortemaa (Finland) and Mr. Nigel Crump (Australia) as Vice-Chairs until the next elections in 2017. The Specialized Section and the secretariat thanked the outgoing Vice-Chair, Mr. Willem Schrage (United States) for his many years of support and contributions to the Specialized Section's work.

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<sup>1</sup> For reference, the delegation of the Netherlands proposed to share the following link:  
<http://www.economist.com/technology-quarterly/2016-06-09/factory-fresh>

## **XX. Adoption of the report**

39. The Specialized Section adopted the report (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.6/2016/2) on its forty-third session. The next session will take place in Geneva from 29 to 31 March 2017.

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