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Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes

Forty-fourth session

Geneva, 29 March (p.m.) – 31 March 2017

Report of the forty-fourth session of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes

I. Introduction

1. The meeting of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Seed Potatoes was chaired by Mr. John Kerr (United Kingdom). The Officer-in-Charge of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Mr. Mika Vepsäläinen, opened the session and welcomed the delegates to its forty-fourth session. He expressed his appreciation for the continued active engagement and valuable work of the group.
2. He recalled the increased attention of the United Nations to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their relevance to the work of this group. He commended the group for having mapped their work with the SDGs and identified how its work contributed to the achievement of the Goals. He stressed that this exercise would serve as a model for all other Specialized Sections under the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (WP.7) in order to reflect on how they can contribute to reaching the SDG targets.
3. He thanked all delegates for their contributions and commitment in advancing the discussions and agenda of the session.

II. Attendance

4. Representatives of the following countries attended the meeting: Albania, Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States.
5. A representative of the European Seed Association also attended.

III Adoption of the agenda

6. The delegations adopted the provisional agenda.

IV Matters arising since the last session

7. The secretariat informed the Specialized Section that the UNECE had taken important budget cuts in this and next biennium (2018-2019) including posts, consultancy, printing and travel funds. For the moment, the secretariat of the Working Party still availed of project funds which covered some of the losses. Fund-raising will continue also in the future.

8. The secretariat also reported on the Conference on Food Loss and Food Waste which was organized jointly with the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Geneva office on 10 November 2016 during the WP.7 session. Speakers from governments, inspection services, retail chains and civil society, as well as producers, discussed the interplay between quality standards and food loss including private standards and technical requirements. It was largely agreed that the UNECE quality standards - including the Seed Potato Standard - contributed to the greater production of good quality produce, thus reducing food loss further up the supply chain.

9. The secretariat also noted that discussions on traceability were advancing and some recommendations, currently mainly from the food inspection agencies and focused on fresh produce, would be further discussed at the next session of the Specialized Section on Fresh Fruit and Vegetables in May 2017. This work would continue under WP.7 and traceability case studies would be collected. The Specialized Section offered to contribute examples of seed potato traceability.

10. The secretariat announced that next session of the Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards would take place on 12-13 April 2017 and the sixty-seventh session of the Commission of UNECE on 26-27 April 2017. The latter will contain a side event featuring the activities of WP.7 including those of the Specialized Sections.

11. The secretariat noted that as part of the budget cuts, external printing funds had been cut. This had led to a substantial delay in the publication of seed potato guides. The Specialized Section expressed its firm objection to cuts in an area which added value to the work of the group and was highly appreciated and useful. Members of the Specialized Section could voice their concerns at the Working Party level and in a formal letter to the Executive Secretary. They could also express their concerns through their national governmental and diplomatic channels, particularly their countries' Permanent Missions to the United Nations Office in New York.

12. The Guide to Seed Potato Diseases, Pests and Defects had been printed and distributed in large numbers but was out of stock. The demand for this publication was very high. While no funds for a re-print were currently available, Australia informed the Section that there might be a possibility to develop a freely available Disease Guide App. Any progress would be reported back to the Specialized Section in due course. The UNECE Guide to Seed Potato Field Inspection was available online and the printing could be finalized soon. The two Guides adopted in November 2016 ("Seed Potato Lot Inspection" and "Operating a Seed Potato Certification Service") would be made available online in the coming weeks. Delegations were asked to provide the included high-resolution photos to the secretariat in the coming weeks.

13. The secretariat explained that translation into other United Nations languages was not possible for UNECE without additional external funds. The United States delegation

noted that their National Potato Board had indicated its willingness to print the Disease Guide in Spanish and to provide it in electronic format to UNECE. The secretariat will send the United States delegation the relevant disclaimer clause on the original version (English) prevailing over any informal translation.

V. Sample sizes

14. The Rapporteur from New Zealand reviewed the proposal on sample sizes and the two possible ways to provide guidance in the UNECE's Standard on the sample size that could ensure desired confidence levels. It has been agreed at previous meetings that a more inclusive approach should be taken to the statistical methods in the Standard's Annex IX (tuber inspection) and add field inspection as well. The Rapporteur outlined the two options: Option 1 consisted of tolerances expressed with a confidence limit (Table 1), i.e. the number of plants to be inspected in order to ensure at a given level of confidence, that the tolerances was not exceeded. This implied that tolerances expressed with a confidence limit required the counting of at least 3 000 plants. Option 2 consisted of a 95 per cent upper confidence interval for the actual sample size and the number of faults found. The second option followed more closely common practice in other arable seed.

15. In subsequent discussions, delegations pointed out that most inspectors and producers worked on the basis of numbers (arithmetic approaches) and it could be difficult to switch to confidence levels which did not necessarily lead to the same numeric results. It was agreed that consumer/buyer and producer concerns needed to be balanced. It had been suggested during previous discussions to define upper and lower levels in order not to be too prescriptive. As this approach had already been taken in the case of tuber inspection (Annex IX of the Standard), it might also be considered for field inspection.

16. Delegations agreed that the tables were very informative and provided guidance to certification bodies. It was therefore decided to include Table 1 (page 3) and Table 4 (page 5) in Annex IX of the Standard for information purposes and to delete the right hand column of Table 4. It was also decided that Annex IX would become a "Sampling annex" and that a working group should work on the integration of tables 1 and the amended Table 4 (without its right hand column) into the Standard (Table 1 of INF.1 would not be included). A working group led by New Zealand with the collaboration of Germany, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom would prepare a proposal for the 2018 session of the Specialized Section.

VI. Blackleg of seed potatoes - review of the Specialized Section's position

17. The delegation from France reviewed the proposed amendments (contained in document INF.3). After discussions, the Specialized Section amended, edited and adopted several changes and included a reference to the UNECE Guide to Seed Potato Diseases, Pests and Defects. A number of delegations reported on their approaches to *Dickeya*, which in many countries was classified as blackleg and not as a quarantine disease, mostly with a zero tolerance. However, it was pointed out that research was on-going and not yet conclusive.

18. In addition, the Specialized Section reviewed the comments submitted by Kenya on the issue of zero tolerance for blackleg in the tropics, i.e. their own field conditions. Several delegations noted that in their production countries, this was not common practice or possible. The Specialized Section's statement on blackleg was therefore amended to include the following sentence: "In line with the UNECE Guide on Operating a Seed Potato

Certification Service, DAs may wish to adopt more stringent tolerances when this is appropriate in their production conditions.”

19. The Specialized Section will inform the Working Party of the amendments to the statement and asked the secretariat to publish the new version after its session. The French delegation will provide the French translation.

VII. Guide on minituber production

20. The Specialized Section discussed the need for a guide on minituber production which could address certain particular issues included in the UNECE Standard and not included in ISPM 33 (“Pest free potato (*Solanum* spp.) micropropagative material and minitubers for international trade) which was an expert-oriented guide.

21. The delegate of Australia briefly reviewed the various minituber production practices which had been described in submissions by the delegations from France, India, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Most countries, he noted, had guides and practices aligned with ISPM 33. While there were certain differences between the countries’ systems, there were a lot of similarities and there might be a need to integrate the mini tuber discussion into the seed schemes.

22. The delegate from Australia also presented a table summarizing those issues that were not addressed in the ISPM 33 Standard such as in vitro, in vivo and field production; trueness of stock, the role of the certifying authority, minimum tuber crop testing and sampling; official labelling details; inspection requirements for pathogen testing; terminology or the acceptance of imported minitubers. It was stressed that while ISPM 33 was the relevant standard for international trade, a new UNECE guide could be a domestic guide for the seed schemes. It should avoid any duplication, address items missing from ISPM 33, add value and build the link to the UNECE standard.

23. The Specialized Section agreed to prepare a first draft guide on minituber production and micropropagation along the lines outlined above. The work would be led by the delegations from Australia, France, Netherland, New Zealand and South Africa.

VIII. Survey of potato virus testing methods

24. The delegate from Australia reviewed the final version of the proposed survey. The Specialized Section agreed to this revised version, which will be sent as an online survey accompanied by an electronic copy of the survey to facilitate the reply process. The survey would be open for responses for a period of two months.

25. The Specialized Section thanked the delegates of Finland and the United Kingdom for their work on this survey. The delegations from Sweden and France provided information on a new virus detection methodology in Sweden as well as on the reliability of potato virus Y detection in potato tubers in France. Once the results of the survey are available, countries will be asked to prepare presentations to facilitate further discussions at the 2018 session of the Specialized Section.

IX. Survey of bacterial testing methodologies

26. As the delegations approved the development of a survey of bacterial testing methodologies, the Specialized Section agreed to initiate work in this area. The delegations

from Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States offered to develop the first draft survey, which would be reviewed at the next Rapporteurs meeting.

27. The Specialized Section decided that the scope of the survey should cover the bacterial diseases *Pectobacterium*, *Dickeya*, *Clavibacter* and *Ralstonia*.

X. Review of risk-based inspections

28. Several delegations provided overviews on the state and practice of risk-based inspections in their countries. In the Netherlands, the IT system was currently redesigned and, once the way of recording inspection results had been revamped, it would become easier to advance risk-based inspections. At the next Rapporteurs meeting, further details would be provided. Australia noted that their programme allowed growers to inspect their own seed subject to the fulfilment of strictly defined criteria such as being trained and qualified growers. The official inspection service audited these growers on a regular basis and unannounced, and fined them in case of abuse. This had relieved the inspectors' workload but the programme was only extended to trusted growers. According to European Union legislation, only designated authorities could do the inspections and certifications. In Scotland, additional inspections are governed by a risk-based approach to ensure better quality of the seed. This approach had been explained to growers and allowed diversion of resources to high-risk areas which required more official inspections.

29. In South Africa, the designated authority was hesitant to delegate authority. The particular concern was how growers would handle conflictual or border-line cases – particularly in the case of tuber inspections, less so in the case of field inspections. It also appeared to be a concern to define robust criteria for the selection and accreditation of growers allowed to conduct activities under official supervision. New Zealand noted that its certification scheme authorized organizations to conduct activities leading to certification on the basis of strict selection criteria (e.g. training, traceability, independence of staff etc.), International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) criteria and audits.

30. It was decided that this item should remain on the Specialized Section's agenda in the future and would also be further discussed at the next Rapporteurs meeting.

XI. Food loss/waste – the case of seed potato certification

31. The Chair gave a brief overview of the food loss discussions at WP.7 and the November 2016 Food Loss Conference. In order to address the issue within the context of seed potato certification, a very informative technical document had been drafted by the delegations from France, Israel and the United States.

32. The Specialized Section reviewed the draft and shortened it for the general audience. A longer version would be prepared for a more technical audience at the next session. The shorter version will be finalized by the working group, and figures and photos would be added in the coming weeks.

XII. True potato seed

33. The Netherlands provided an update on developments at the European Union level where a True Potato Seed (TPS) experiment had been developed for countries able to participate. The experiment was designed to cover listed varieties and those in trial. In the Netherlands, one company had so far applied in 2017 for a tetraploid hybrid variety. This variety was in the final stage of obtaining plant breeders rights. This material could then be

entered into the experiment. However, first, adjustments needed to be made in the phytosanitary regulations of the European Union. He also noted that tetraploid varieties showed less uniformity than common varieties. This could be a challenge also for the Standard and certification, and could mean? mean setting tolerances for uniformity.

34. The delegate of France recalled that this was a very new area for the European Union and while the experiment had been set up, so far not a single variety had been listed to start it. He also pointed to the various exemptions granted to the EU legislation under the experiment's protocol, e.g. on the varietal purity (not applicable to this material), external defects as well as sizing and size differences. He cautioned that currently there was not enough information or enough varieties on the market and the new technology could raise concerns. The delegation from the Netherlands noted that this might in fact be the future but, if not successful, would be removed.

35. Should hybrid varieties obtain plant breeders rights, questions remained as to whether they would be added to the common catalogue of agricultural plant species, which can be marketed in the European Union or eventually included in certification schemes. The delegation from the Netherlands opined that non-listed varieties with plant breeders' rights should be part of the experiment. In the United States or New Zealand, this would be possible. For several delegations it was very important to assess the diversity of the new varieties.

36. The Specialized Section agreed to keep this item on the agenda to monitor future developments and assess the role of certification.

XIII. List of national certification schemes for seed potatoes

37. The Specialized Section reviewed the list of national certification schemes. The delegation from Germany had compiled this much appreciated list on the basis of information obtained from European Union countries. The delegate of Germany had also contacted non-EU agencies and, so far, received replies from Norway, Serbia and Switzerland. Delegations were asked to fill in missing information as the list will also be published on the UNECE web page.

38. In reviewing the second list, i.e. the contact list of authorities, it was decided to change the heading to "certifying authorities". This would lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive list which would be amended with input from delegates. This list would be used as the mailing list for the virus testing survey.

39. The Specialized Section decided to review the definition of "Designated Authority" as contained in the UNECE Standard (page 6) and propose new wording and terminology at the next session in 2018. The work would be led by the Specialized Section's Chair and Vice-Chairs with collaboration from New Zealand.

XIV. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the work of the Specialized Section

40. The Specialized Section reviewed the document, which was presented by the Chair and the secretariat and had been prepared together with Finland, France and the United Kingdom. The working group had mapped the work of the Specialized Section against four SDGs (considered most relevant) and their targets. On the basis of the mapping exercise, the secretariat had designed a poster and included text to be selected and adapted. The SDGs had been adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 and defined the development agenda of the United Nations until 2030. It was therefore considered highly

topical both on technical and political levels to prepare this material and publish the Specialized Section's contribution to the advancement of the SDGs. UNECE as well as Member States could use the poster and the mapping for promotional and educational purposes.

41. The Specialized Section finalized the messages and text of the poster, agreed to focus on three SDGs and adopted the heading "SDGs and the UNECE Standard for Seed Potatoes". The working group (Australia, Finland, France and the United Kingdom) would work with the secretariat to produce the final version. Delegations were asked to provide high-resolution photos for illustration. A link to the Sections other work (including the promotional leaflet) would be added.

XV. Promotion and capacity-building – Review of the information leaflet

42. The delegation from Germany introduced the first draft of the promotional leaflet which was reviewed by the working group. The leaflet would be aligned with the text of the Guide on Operating a Seed Potato Certification Service. The delegations from Australia and the Netherlands joined the working group (Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, United Kingdom and the United States). The current draft would be circulated for comments.

43. The delegation from the Netherlands suggested considering discussing the development of an e-learning platform at the next Rapporteurs meeting.

44. The secretariat informed delegations about a possible new project on food loss reduction which could provide funding for capacity-building also in the areas covered by the Specialized Section.

XVI. Future work

45. The Specialized Section decided to include the following items on its 2018 agenda:
- Sampling – statistics
 - Guide on minituber production and micropropagation
 - Survey on potato virus testing
 - Survey on bacteria testing methods
 - Review of risk based inspections
 - Food loss and waste
 - True potato seed
 - Update of list of national certification schemes
 - Update of list of designated authorities and standard
 - Reporting on SDGs and the work of the Section
 - Promotion and capacity-building brochure
 - Reporting on certification and research practices in various countries (topics to be determined)

XVII. Other business

46. The Netherlands invited the Specialized Section to an informal Rapporteurs meeting in the Netherlands which will be held in Emmeloord, Netherlands, from 27-29 September 2017. The next formal session of the Specialized Section was tentatively scheduled for 19-21 March 2018. An informal Rapporteurs meeting would be organized prior to or during the World Potato Congress in Cusco, Peru, which will take place from 27-31 May 2018.

47. The delegation from Belgium announced that they had prepared a much appreciated guidance and reference leaflet in a small, condensed format for its inspectors and growers.

XVIII. Election of officers

48. The Specialized Section elected Mr. John Kerr (United Kingdom) as Chair, and Ms. Hanna Kortemaa (Finland) and Mr. Nigel Crump (Australia) as Vice-Chairs.

XIX. Adoption of the report

49. The Specialized Section adopted the report (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.6/2017/2) on its forty-fourth session. The next session will take place in Geneva, Switzerland, from 19-21 March 2018.
