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Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards

Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

Specialized Section on Standardization of Meat

Twenty-eighth session

Geneva, 12-13 October 2020

**Report of the twenty-eighth session of the Specialized
Section on Standardization of Meat**

I. Introduction

1. Mr. Ian King (Australia), Chairman of the Specialized Section, opened and chaired the session.
2. The Chief of the Market Access Section of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Mr. Mika Vepsäläinen, welcomed the delegates to the first online standardization meeting of the UNECE Specialized Section on Standardization of Meat. He expressed his gratitude for their support and noted that he looked forward to hearing how their countries had adjusted to manage trade flows and inspection in light of the additional challenges brought on by COVID-19. He also informed delegations that the UNECE had joined the United Nations Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems to support United Nations country teams and Resident Coordinators in this crisis and the recovery phases. He said that while these times called for better crisis response, recovery and resilience building, he also emphasized that in the long run, we will all need to examine our contribution to sustainable food systems with all their dimensions (economic, social and environmental) and their integration into national and international food policy agendas.
3. He also noted that at the United Nations in Geneva, the current situation had led to certain adjustments in the past months leading to, regrettably, a lack of interpretation facilities for this meeting. The report and any decisions taken will be adopted in an inter-sessional approval procedure after this meeting.
4. He thanked all participants for their active participation throughout the year and wished the Specialized Section fruitful deliberations.

II. Attendance

5. Representatives of the following United Nations member countries attended the meeting: Argentina, Azerbaijan, Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Poland, Russian Federation, United States of America.

6. Representatives from the following observer organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), associations, academia and private sector groups also attended: AUS-Meat Limited, Birkenwood PT, International Meat Secretariat (IMS), Institut de l'Elevage (IDELE), Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), Polish Beef Association, Slaney Foods International, University of Novi Sad.

III. Adoption of the agenda

7. The delegates adopted the agenda.

IV. Matters arising since the last session

UNECE and subsidiary bodies

8. The Chief of the Market Access Section informed delegations that the Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards last met on 29 June 2020 in the format of virtual, informal consultations. Pursuant to the special procedures during the COVID-19 period, any recommendations for business-critical decisions emanating from these informal consultations were submitted to a silence procedure in line with the special arrangements.

9. He mentioned that the UNECE budget submission for the 2022 budget was in process. He also highlighted that the 2021 session of the Economic Commission for Europe would focus on the circular economy and the sustainable management of natural resources, including the importance of food production and trade in any circular economy approach.

V. Eating quality

10. The Rapporteur for eating quality (Poland) provided a brief update on the work of the UNECE scientific reference group for eating quality. A delegate from Australia, also a member of the eating quality group, provided detailed information on the establishment of the Internal Meat Research 3G Foundation tasked with supporting the development of eating quality research, predictive models, common protocols and common data to enable the pooling of data globally. The Foundation, a non-profit and non-commercial entity, had started to work on developing principles and giving them effect to enable an international eating quality research platform. He also noted that some years ago, the UNECE standard for bovine meat had been amended to include provisions on e.g. measuring marbling or colour. He updated delegates on recent training activities and software design to facilitate the collecting and sharing of data and mentioned on-going work on a standard anthology, on flavour and on data-sharing agreements.

11. The Chair stressed the importance of the eating quality group's work as an extension of the Specialized Section's work on the UNECE's standard for bovine meat. The Specialized Section thanked the presenters for their update and the eating quality group for its work. The next update would be provided at the 2021 session.

VI. Revision of standards

Porcine meat, carcasses and cuts

12. The Specialized Section reviewed the proposals by the Russian Federation on the porcine meat standard (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2020/4) and the proposal for revision of the standard submitted by the delegation of Serbia (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2020/INF.1).

13. *Marbling in porcine meat:* The Specialized Section reviewed the proposed new provisions on marbling of porcine meat for inclusion in the UNECE Standard. The United States delegation pointed out that proposals on such provisions had also emerged at their national level and the industry had developed specific programmes to address this. The delegate of the United States offered to provide more information to the Specialized Section. The delegate of Serbia had provided photos in the INF.1 document which he noted were used in scientific research but not for the marketing of porcine meat. The delegations agreed to consider the inclusion of marbling and colour provisions in the standard. A Rapporteurs group (Russian Federation, United States) would prepare a detailed proposal for the 2021 session.

14. *Fat content in meat (particularly bovine meat):* The Specialized Sections discussed how much fat meat could contain to be considered meat. It was noted that when fat is produced from beef (such as angus), it could contain lean tissue. This, it was pointed out, impacted among others the determination of customs duties. It was therefore decided to explore this further and determine whether parameters would be needed to define the acceptable fat content. Several countries indicated that they faced similar issues and noted that the topic was also linked to the definition of the relevant HS codes which currently existed only for pig fat but no other species. The Specialized Section decided to continue work on this topic and to create a working group. The working group would submit its proposals to the 2021 session of the Specialized Section.

15. *Bone meal:* The Specialized Section discussed the proposal on bone meal quality and took note that (as pointed out by the delegation from Serbia) this product was outside of the current scope of UNECE standards, which focused on produce for human consumption and not animal feed. Any continuation of work on this topic would need to be based on a strong interest by the Specialized Section as well as evidence that this produce was internationally traded in significant volumes.

16. *Animal protein from connective tissue:* The Specialized Section took note of this proposal and the interest by several delegations to explore the need for an international standard. The delegation of the United States noted that it already had national standards on animal protein derived from connective tissue. The Specialized Section decided to discuss this topic further and establish a rapporteurs group (comprising of delegates with knowledge and interest in this product for international sales—Russian Federation and other countries) which would present national standards for animal proteins to the 2021 session of the Specialized Section to elaborate proposals to the 2021 session of the Specialized Section.

VII. Discussion on the possible development of international minimum sustainability guidelines for the meat sector

17. Following initial discussions at various symposia held by the Specialized Section, delegations discussed the possible development of international minimum sustainability

guidelines for the meat sector. The delegation from Australia provided a report on the Australian Beef Sustainability Framework. The presenter stressed that this industry-led framework, in place since 2014, was a reporting system and not a certification scheme. He outlined the organizational set up, noting the importance of stakeholders' consultations to define the purpose and scope, which focused on meeting consumer and community expectations, market access, customer demands, access to capital, building trust, and minimizing and anticipating regulation in favour of industry taking pro-active approaches. The framework, he highlighted, served as a guide to track performance on farms, feedlots, processors, and within the live export sector; to align social, economic and environmental welfare; to help access markets; and to provided all interested parties with a clear snapshot. He also outlined its four main themes: animal welfare, economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and people and community. The framework was also aligned to industry strategies to build resilient business and environmental sustainability. Being a dynamic process, the Framework's annual report acknowledged success but also challenges which impacted the industry and the environment¹

18. The Chair stressed that this framework was just one example of many sustainability initiatives in place in various countries. In some countries, it was pointed out, carbon sequestration and reduction programmes were tied to sustainability programmes and part of standards and trade requirements. In order to further discussions, the delegation from Poland suggested linking these deliberations to the work at the level of the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef. The delegate from Argentina suggested to also include the FAO Livestock Environmental Assessment and Performance Partnership (LEAP).

19. The Specialized Section took note of the update provided by Australia in relation to the Australian Beef Sustainability Framework. It was acknowledged that similar projects existed globally, as the sustainability issue is a global matter. There was interest from delegates in this important topic given the alignment of sustainability with broader UNECE goals linking for example also to the experts of the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef. The Specialized Section therefore decided to advance this topic and organize a seminar/webinar either in conjunction with or prior to the next session. The secretariat would contact possible experts and inform delegates on meeting arrangements in due course.

VIII. Alignment of meat cut descriptions and harmonized system codes

20. The topic of scoping of a potential project on the alignment of the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS) codes alignment with the UNECE meat cut codes was proposed at the workshop of the Specialized Section in Potsdam, Germany, in 2019 and reviewed and endorsed by the November 2019 session of the Working Party. The Specialized Section reviewed the proposals by Poland, including modalities for alignment, and Serbia, concerning definitions.

21. In addition, during the session, the delegate from Australia outlined the build-up of the codes and a possible mapping which compared the HS code system use by the World Customs Organization(WCO), and at UNECE level (meat cut description codes) as well as at country level (tariff line codes) (see document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2020/INF.3). The delegate of Germany mentioned that in the European Union 8-digit codes were used for statistical reasons and also as tariff lines.

¹ See <https://www.sustainableaustralianbeef.com.au/annual-update>.

The delegate from Australia suggested that mapping the UNECE cut codes against the 6-digit HS codes could be a straightforward process via a spread sheet or an electronic tool. If, in addition, the alignment with the country-specific tariff line codes (8-digit codes) were to be added to the project, the exercise would become more complex. However, the latter option would facilitate customs clearance and related trade flows even more but would require more information from national customs authorities.

22. The delegation of the United States highlighted the complexity of aligning 8-digit codes and proposed staying at 6-digit level in a first stage. While the delegate of Poland agreed that the alignment of 8 digits could be more elaborate, he expressed his support for the project on 8-digit codes. The 8-digit codes could operate via a “hub translator” which would allow the continuous use of the current codes while simultaneously converting them.

23. The Specialized Section agreed to first obtain a clear understanding of the scope of the problem. The Specialized Section asked the secretariat and the working group (Australia, France, Poland and Serbia) to contact the WCO to set up a virtual meeting between WCO representatives and the UNECE working group to better understand the scope of the work and how to advance it. This would allow the Specialized Section to set the priorities and make a more informed decision on what solution would be the most suitable. Engagement with national customs offices could complement the WCO’s answers and determine e.g. work on mapping of the 6-digit conversion for bovine and ovine as well as porcine meat or mapping also the 8-digit code system.

IX. COVID-19: Exchange of experiences

24. The Specialized Section exchanged experiences on countries’ efforts to ensure business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The delegation from Australia highlighted how virtual meetings, virtual auditing, and virtual training had supported and ensured the continuation of the inspection and grading processes in these challenging times. In addition, close cooperation between government institutions and the private sector had led to common approaches and ensured resilience at the level of the validation of compliance with standards. While online tools and new processes had been very useful, there were also mixed views on the limits of virtual audits, which were not necessarily cheaper and involved lower levels of engagement. The delegate from Australia also stressed the value of standards in these difficult times for trade and consumers who had their trust in the quality of produce validated via inspections and audits.

25. The United States delegation reported that from the outbreak of the pandemic, the government had developed contingency plans so that the grading services could continue. This included accommodating new ways of working, use of technology for camera-based inspections, remote grading and audits. He also mentioned the workforce-related challenges ranging from medical conditions to availability of trained staff and procurements of personal protective gear. He noted that even during the closure of major plants (beef and pork), grading could proceed without any delay. On the poultry and egg side, consumers were concerned about the continuity of the supply chain and shortages, particularly when workers’ falling ill caused backlogs in the harvesting process (in poultry). While auditing, grading and inspection continued normally, new challenges will most probably arise during the winter months.

26. In Poland, the full or partial closure of the food service and hotel industries (HORECA sector) at the onset of the pandemic caused a decline in beef prices. In addition to the low demand, slower operating plants added to the problem; and prices recovered only over the summer months. The delegate of Germany mentioned that in her country,

staff in several slaughterhouses got infected and this resulted in closures. While Germany had not been faced with any grading problems, it was faced with an additional challenge in the pork sector, the African swine fever. The combination of two crises resulted in slaughterhouses' operating at lowered capacity, reduced exports and too many animals in an already challenged market for porcine meat. The market for beef meat had suffered much less. The delegation of the Russian Federation reported that most companies had stepped up the protective measures for their workforce. The overall market for meat had benefited from the increased demand for fresh meat products by households. This constituted an obvious change in consumer behaviour and a demand for more stable diets.

27. The Specialized Section highlighted that overall, in times of crisis, standards served to keep consumer confidence levels high. In addition, the use of new technologies had ensured continuous inspection and grading and ensured that supply chains remained intact. While internal lockdowns and border closures had posed challenges, the cooperation between the public and the private sectors had resulted in the development of contingency plans and resilience for coping in these difficult times.

X. Discussion on the possible development of a livestock language

28. The delegation from Australia presented an overview of existing livestock language initiated in 2016. With the aim of introducing more transparency and consistency and including both feed-back and feed-forward, this collaborative effort had resulted in the establishment of an expert group and the production of a white paper, a glossary of terms and recommendations. The work is currently under industry review, to ensure its being future-proof and to allow for better data transfer and the inclusion of genetics. The set of national guidelines will be for endorsement by the stakeholders and to get industry uptake.² Whenever possible, it includes also international developments and livestock language.

29. The Specialized Section took note of this work and welcomed the opportunity to review the finished guidelines. Harmonizing livestock language could be of great interest to the Specialized Section, also in view of linking up with the relevant ISO subcommittee in which several members of the Specialized Section participated as well. The Specialized Section decided to include this item in the agenda of the 2021 Specialized Section.

XI. Other business

30. Delegations were informed that the 2021 International Congress of Meat Science and Technology (ICoMST) is scheduled to take place in Krakow, Poland, from 23 to 27 August 2021. The Specialized Section welcomed the possibility of holding a symposium or workshop prior to the 2021 Congress. The delegation from Poland offered to help with the organization of the symposium. The Specialized Section thanked Poland for this offer.

XII. Future work

31. Further items for the 2021 agenda included:

- Revision of the Standard for Porcine meat (marbling and fat content);

² See Beef Language White paper <https://www.mla.com.au/Research-and-development/Search-RD-reports/RD-report-details/Market-Information/Australian-Beef-Language-White-Paper/3086>.

- International standard for animal protein derived from connective tissue;
- An update on development of international minimum sustainability guidelines for the meat sector;
- An update on eating quality;
- An update on the possibility to align the ECE cut codes with the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS codes);
- An update on the development of a livestock language.

XIII. Election of officers

32. The Specialized Section elected Mr. Ian King (Australia) as Chairperson and Mr. Mark Lobstein (United States) as Vice-Chairperson.

XIV. Adoption of the report

33. The Specialized Section adopted the report on its twenty-eighth session (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2020/2). The tentative dates of the next session are 6-8 September 2021.
