



UNECE Conference on Traceability of Agricultural Produce (3 November 2015)

71st session of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (2-4 November 2015)

Opening remarks by Mr. Andrey Vasilyev Deputy Executive Secretary, UNECE

Distinguished Delegates and Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me extend a warm welcome to all participants in the UNECE Conference on Traceability of Agricultural Produce, held within the framework of the 71st session of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards.

As you may know, the term *traceability* refers to the ability to track the movement of food, feed and substance through all stages of production, processing and distribution. Over the past decade, traceability has become an important component of food safety and quality regulations. This push for better traceability comes both from consumer demand for more information, and from authorities needing to ensure food safety and reduce food fraud.

These days, when we buy fruit, vegetables, meat or fish in the supermarket we expect to be able to see where the food has come from. We also expect to see if the food contains Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO), or ingredients that some are sensitive to, such as nuts, milk, gluten or monosodium glutamat (MSG). And we may also want to know if it was produced according to social, ecological or ethical standards.

Out of concern for food safety, authorities also require producers to keep track of where the food came from and where it was sold. If a food safety problem is found – such as salmonella in eggs – authorities can quickly identify where the batch came from and order it to be taken off the market.

In addition, food fraud and mislabelling have become a growing concern over the past years, as exemplified by the horsemeat scandal.

Knowing where food and ingredients come from requires systems for tracing them back to their origin, throughout the supply chain. For example, in the meat sector it requires tracking where an animal was born and where it was slaughtered. Customers may also want to know how the animal was fed, the level of antibiotics used, etc. For fruits and vegetables, traceability can require tracking where the produce was grown, or for example the level of pesticide residues.

Traceability has therefore become an important component of food safety and quality regulations, as well as for company management systems and certification processes.

The advantages of traceability are numerous and include:

- Improved management of risks related to food safety and animal health
- Reduced cost of recalls, by being able to quickly identify which batch of food may be affected by a food safety issue
- Provision of reliable information on where and how fruit, vegetables, nuts and meat were produced, thus guaranteeing product authenticity
- Provision of additional information on methods of production (e.g. ecological or fair trade as well as the decent work aspects of production).
- Enhanced supply-side management in companies and improved product quality through access to better data on how the produce was grown and handled.

The challenges of traceability are mostly related to costs and implementation. Examples include:

- Traceability means additional costs and investments, both in terms of time and technology (e.g. computer systems or labelling / tagging systems). However, in many agricultural sectors margins are very low and the costs often have to be borne by producers and farmers. This could constitute entry barriers to their joining international supply chains, in particular for small scale farmers and those in developing countries.

What is the current state of affairs?

Although traceability implies an end-to-end process in the supply chain (farm to fork), legal requirements for traceability are often limited to keeping track of products' origin and destination one step up and one step down the value chain. Many organizations continue to exchange data manually and only a few links in the supply chains use software for traceability. And, when they do, software applications vary. Thus, in spite of current EU regulations and national legislation, the tracing back of fruit and vegetables, and many other products, to their true origin remains a challenge.

While there are many sector and country initiatives to improve traceability, there is a risk that they will contribute to the spread of different solutions, unless further action is taken to harmonize standards and solutions.

The objectives of this conference are therefore to:

- Review the opportunities, challenges and technical options for increased traceability of the origin, production methods and contents of food.
- Identify realistic, efficient and affordable ways for:
 - (i) regulators to ensure better traceability as a means to improve food safety and limit fraud; and
 - (ii) the private sector to comply with regulations, while reaping the benefits of an increasing market for safe and traceable food and improving supply chain management capacities.
- Look at how international marketing and quality standards might support traceability efforts, e.g. through labelling requirements or secure code marks.
- Bring together public and private sector and international organizations to outline the issues and identify ways these could be addressed through the work of UNECE and others.

UNECE has a special role to play in this regard. As a solutions- and consensus based organization with a long history in bringing public and private sectors and international organizations together (Geneva as ideal place for that), UNECE has been working on agricultural quality standards since the 1950's, and has adopted over 100 standards for fresh fruit and vegetables; nuts and dried fruit; seed potatoes; and meat. The UNECE agricultural quality standards are developed through an intergovernmental process, with input from the private sector and other relevant stakeholders. In addition, under another UNECE body called UN/CEFACT, work is also currently underway on developing standards for traceability of certain agricultural produce.

This conference is being organized by UNECE's secretariat, with input from the Specialized Sections on Meat, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables, Dry and Dried Produce, and Seed Potatoes.

We would therefore like to thank the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Working Party (Mr. Ian Hewett and Ms. Agnieszka Sudol) as well as the Specialized Sections for helping to shape the event.

We are also grateful to the speakers who have come from far to present their work and findings for their knowledge and time. We also appreciate very much the presence and contributions from FAO, OECD, and the Geneva-based agencies (ILO, ITC, ISO, and WTO).