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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 Meat

Thirty-first session

Geneva, 28 and 29 August 2023

## Report of the thirty-first session of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Meat

### I. Introduction

1. The thirty-first session of the Specialized Section on Standardization of Meat was chaired by Mr. Ian King (Australia). The session was held in person, with the possibility of remote connection for the seminar on sustainable meat and livestock, held as part of agenda item 11.
2. The Chairperson welcomed participants to the meeting, recalling the progress of the Specialized Section over the past decades and the many standards developed, and emphasizing the importance of regularly reviewing the standards to ensure they remain relevant.
3. Mr. Ariel Ivanier, Chief (Officer in Charge) of the Market Access Section, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), welcomed delegates to the session, highlighting the importance of the agricultural quality standards in ensuring efficient trade, thus contributing to sustainable food systems. He recalled the history of the Working Party and noted that the meat standards were relatively newer in the standards portfolio, with the first ECE standard on meat having been adopted in 1998 for porcine meat. This had been followed by the adoption of the ECE standard on bovine meat in 2000, a standard that was up for review with proposals both for additions to the standard and for work on the full digitalization of the standard. He further highlighted the need to improve the sustainability of food systems, which had been a core focus of the United Nations since the initial Food Systems Summit held in 2021.

### II. Attendance

4. Representatives of the following countries attended the meeting: Australia, Morocco, Poland, the Russian Federation, the United States of America, and Uruguay.
5. Representatives from the following non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business associations, academia, and private sector entities also attended: AUS-MEAT (Australia); Birkenwood International; Global Observatory for Accurate Livestock Sciences (GOALSciences); Institut de l'Élevage (IDELE, France); International Meat Research 3G Foundation; Meat & Livestock Australia Limited; National Meat Institute (INAC, Uruguay);



Polish Beef Association; Federal University of Goiás (Brazil); Queen's University Belfast (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).

### **III. Adoption of the agenda (agenda item 1)**

6. The Specialized Section adopted the revised annotated provisional agenda (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/1/Rev.1).

### **IV. Matters arising since the last session (agenda item 2)**

#### **(a) Recent developments in the United Nations, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and its subsidiary bodies**

7. The Chief (Officer in Charge) of the Market Access Section, Economic Cooperation and Trade Division of ECE informed of recent and forthcoming intergovernmental meetings and other matters of relevance to the work of the Specialized Section. Since the last meeting of the Specialized Section, the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards at its seventy-seventh session (14–16 November 2022) had adopted three new standards for dry and dried produce, changes to the standard layout for dry and dried produce, as well as one new recommendation and four revised standards for fresh fruit and vegetables (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2022/2).

8. He drew attention to the eighth session of the Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards (26 and 27 June 2023), and the seventieth session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, held under the theme “Digital and green transformations for sustainable development in the region of the Economic Commission for Europe” (18 and 19 April 2023), the outcomes of which will shape the work of ECE normative machinery and technical assistance pillars in the coming two years. He also referred to a regional preparatory meeting for the 2023 Food Systems Stocktaking Moment (28 March), which had been held in collaboration with the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub and the Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems, of which ECE is a member, followed by the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development on 29 and 30 March 2023.

9. He referred that the seventy-eighth session of the Working Party would be held on 13–15 November 2023 and would adopt new and revised standards developed by the Specialized Sections.

#### **(b) Recent developments in other organizations**

10. Ms. Laura Ryan, Global Chair of Meat Business Women, presented via a pre-recorded video message on its 2023 report on gender representation in the meat industry. The aim of the study was to understand how many women are working in the meat industry and what the enablers and barriers are. The data showed that since its last report in 2020, the representation of women had increased at chief executive, board-level director, and executive levels, while representation at unskilled levels had declined. The report found that 63 per cent of those working in the meat industry believe perceptions are changing. Still, half of the people working in the industry rated the meat industry as less inclusive than other industries, and 46 per cent said that culture in the industry was a major barrier to progress. Two-thirds of women under 30 years of age indicated that they would be more interested in advancing if they saw senior leaders with the work-life balance they want. She emphasized the need for gender-proofing of working practices and patterns, including support to working parents regardless of gender.

## **V. Terms of Reference and Working Procedures of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards and its Specialized Sections (agenda item 3)**

11. The secretariat informed about the progress of the work of the open working group, set up by the Working Party to review its Terms of Reference and Working Procedures. The open working group, consisting of Brazil, Poland, Spain, and the United States, met in February 2023 and provided initial suggestions for revisions to the Terms of Reference. Following this, the proposed changes were tabled at the meetings of each Specialized Section, with additional suggestions provided by the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables, as contained in document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/INF.1.

12. The Specialized Section was invited to provide comments on the Terms of Reference and the Working Procedures as input to the open working group, which will submit its proposals to the Working Party for consideration at its 2023 meeting. No suggestions were received.

## **VI. Survey on standards implementation (agenda item 4)**

13. The secretariat reported on the results of the survey launched in consultation with the Bureau of the Working Party to document the use of ECE standards and their link to relevant legislative frameworks in participating countries (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/INF.2). The Specialized Section was invited to provide suggestions for how to further document the use and impact of the meat standards.

14. The Specialized Section discussed the survey findings. It was suggested it would be useful to include questions on what was preventing adoption of the standards, and to also reach out to industry bodies to enquire about the use of the standards. The Specialized Section was invited to provide additional suggestions to the secretariat in writing after the session.

## **VII. Revision of standards: Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts (agenda item 5)**

15. At its 2022 session, the Specialized Section agreed to initiate a review of the entire Standard for Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts. During the first half of 2023, the standard was discussed in a rapporteur's group led by the delegation of Australia. The group met three times and submitted a proposal for consideration of the Specialized Section as contained in document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/3.

16. The delegation of Australia introduced the proposal by the rapporteur's group, which consisted of the addition of two cuts as well as a proposed expansion of the text on meat quality standards in section 5.7. The proposed text builds on section 5.7 of the standard and presents a standardized approach to collecting eating quality grading data. It covers carcass pre-assessment conditions, assessor technique, meat quality standard measurements, carcass assessor competence and eligibility, and feedback and labelling standards. The delegation of Australia explained that the meat quality standard text proposed was not an eating quality measurement system, but a series of measurements that could be used to underpin an eating quality assessment system.

17. The representatives of Institut de l'Élevage of France noted that different countries cut carcasses in different ways, which needed consideration. The delegation of the United States enquired regarding the recommended viewing angle included in the proposal and commented on the temperature ranges of the carcass prior to assessment, informing that they had found that different temperature windows would apply when using camera-assisted technology to help the grading. They also suggested that language related to viewing angles be changed from "must" to "recommended" to reflect the voluntary nature of the standard.

18. The Specialized Section discussed whether the proposed text should be integrated into the standard replacing section 5.7, whether it should be better placed in an annex or become

a separate document from the standard, with the delegations of Poland and the United States initially supporting it being an annex or a separate document.

19. Following bilateral consultations, the Specialized Section agreed to insert revisions to document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/3 indicating the recommended nature of the proposed viewing angles, and specifying how to identify the position for assessing subcutaneous rib fat and total rib fat. It was further agreed that the revised text would replace section 5.7 of the standard. The proposal on adding two cuts to the standard was accepted without any change.

20. The Specialized Section agreed to integrate the revisions into the standard for Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts, replacing section 5.7, and to submit it for adoption by the Working Party at its 2023 session.

## **VIII. Digitalization of the Standard for Bovine meat – proposal by the delegation of Poland (agenda item 6)**

21. At the thirtieth session of the Specialized Section, the delegation of Poland proposed to look into further digitization of the ECE Standard for Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts. The delegation volunteered to take the lead on such work and develop a proposed work plan. During 2023, three informal meetings were held to discuss the potential scope and objectives of such work. As a result of these meetings, the delegation of Poland submitted a proposal for the development of a fully digitized version of the ECE Standard for Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts for the consideration of the Specialized Section, as contained in document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/4.

22. The delegation of Poland introduced the proposal, explaining that the ECE code for purchaser requirements for beef, as defined in chapter 4 of the ECE Standard for Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts, consists of 14 fields and 20 digits, allowing for precise identification of meat cuts in trade. However, when buyers and sellers want to include optional parameters (listed under each cut as “To be specified”) such parameters could currently not be included in the 20-digit code string. The proposal was to establish a standardized and effective method for encoding the “To be specified” parameters in the AI(7002) GS1 128 format, facilitating precise identification and description of meat items in line with ECE standards. This would enable better identification, description, and tracking of meat products in trade, while also enhancing transparency, efficiency, and accuracy within the industry. It would also facilitate interoperability and communication between buyers and sellers.

23. The Specialized Section discussed the proposal, acknowledging the possibility of removing barriers to e-trade, and of improving statistics on prices which would enhance the availability of information about value creation. The delegation of Poland proposed to start the work officially and create a group of experts to understand what cuts should be included. The delegation of Australia and the United States supported the idea to start work with pilot cuts, to identify the top five parameters for the pilot work, possibly through a questionnaire to be circulated by the secretariat.

24. The Specialized Section agreed to establish a rapporteur’s group led by Poland to take this work forward.

## **IX. Discussion on the possible development of a livestock language (agenda item 7)**

25. At the 2022 session of the Specialized Section, the delegation of Australia presented on the work to develop National Bovine Livestock Language Guidelines for Australia. The guidelines would work as a voluntary standard, providing a harmonized language for describing live cattle. The Specialized Section decided to continue the discussion on the development of guidelines for livestock language at its 2023 session to explore if there is an opportunity to harmonize such language under the auspices of ECE.

26. Ms. Sarah Strachan, Group manager for Adoption & Commercialisation at Meat & Livestock Australia, introduced the finalized national guidelines. The guidelines had been developed through a consultative process which had started in 2016 with a Beef language review white paper, followed by the establishment of an expert group, a global scan of different types of language used to describe cattle, and the undertaking of consultations, including industry review. The full process had taken three years to complete and had resulted in the adoption of a set of agreed National Bovine Livestock Language Guidelines, which were complemented by a glossary of terms, a supplement, and recommendations. Key lessons from the process included: the importance of having a clear user in mind, and of finding the balance between a technical and an easy-to-understand guide; the need for extensive consultations; and that there is no need to recreate existing standards and measurements that work well. Following their adoption, the guidelines have been transferred to be housed at AUS-MEAT and will undergo a technical review every two years. The next step is to turn these guidelines into tools that industry actors can use.

27. The delegation of Poland congratulated the delegation of Australia on the achievement, indicating it was a good example of how to proceed which could be used by other countries. The delegation of the United States enquired if the European Union countries have a common livestock language. The delegation of Poland suggested that there may not be a need to change existing terminology, instead, a translation tool could be used to facilitate understanding between trade partners.

## **X. Alignment of the Economic Commission for Europe cut codes with the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (agenda item 8)**

28. Following discussions at its 2022 session, the Specialized Section agreed to the proposal by the rapporteur's group to include six-digit Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS) codes in the ECE Standard for Bovine Meat – Carcasses and Cuts, with the change subsequently approved by the Working Party at its 2022 meeting. The Specialized Section had also agreed to continue to work on the alignment of the ECE cut codes with the World Customs Organization HS codes, as proposed by the rapporteur's group (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/2022/17).

29. Mr. Tim Ryan, Manager - Global Trade Development, Australia Meat Industry Council, via a pre-recorded statement, introduced the work done by the rapporteur's group during 2021–2022 and the way forward proposed by the group as discussed in the 2022 meeting of the Specialized Section. He referred to document ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/INF.3, highlighting that the document integrates the latest changes approved by the Working Party. He suggested that the porcine and/or ovine standards could be revised in a similar way. Another possibility was to produce a document showing how the two systems apply to different cuts, which would facilitate for those trading meat products under the ECE standard to use the document to determine the appropriate HS code.

30. The Specialized Section discussed possibilities to encourage customs to use the ECE codes contained in the standard, but it was clarified that customs use the 6-digit HS codes with extensions to 8 or 10-digit levels to determine what the applicable customs codes are, and that the extension of these 6-digit HS codes to the 8 or 10-digit level varies by the economy. Custom codes are also much broader than the ECE cut codes, i.e. one custom code would group many cut codes. It was further noted that the insertion of HS codes into the ECE standards could be a step towards creating more recognition of the ECE standard.

31. The Specialized Section agreed to continue the work on integrating HS codes into the meat standards. The delegation of Australia would take the lead, supported by the delegations of Poland and the United States.

## **XI. Eating quality (agenda item 9)**

32. Mr. Rod Polkinghorne, Chair, International Meat Research 3G Foundation (IMR3GF), provided an update on the progress made in the past year to facilitate the development and application of eating quality standards under the umbrella of IMR3GF. Major advancements included the accreditation of the Europe-based chiller assessment training, the conduct of training courses in France, Spain and the United Kingdom, and the collection of data utilizing the standards to support multiple research projects. The foundation had also further developed a European consumer prediction model and was establishing infrastructure to enable research and commercial applications. Extensive data collection had continued throughout the year, which had supported a large project called INTAQT funded by the European Union programme Horizon Europe, and had facilitated collaborative project between partners in Australia, Ireland and the United States investigating the relationship between genomic data and consumer sensory testing outcomes across 9,000 cattle sourced in the three countries. The DATAbank system now included compatible data relating to around 200,000 consumers from twelve countries, with additional data continuously added.

## **XII. Capacity-building and promotional activities (agenda item 10)**

33. The delegation of the United States informed that it had issued the first edition of the poultry grading picture series, a visual accompaniment to the United States Poultry Grading Manual that illustrates various defects described in the official United States classes, standards, and grades for poultry. They highlighted that the illustrations selected are to assist the United States Department of Agriculture poultry commodity graders, industry, academia, and food buyers. The grading manual is aimed to be used as a reference and an educational tool. It is intended to help with subjective descriptions and provides a visual guide to go with it. The manual is intended to be a living document, with additional species and other additional information to be added over time. It is available in hard copy, as online version in PDF, and in the form of a web page formatted for online viewing.

## **XIII. Sustainable Development Goal 12 and sustainable food systems: sustainability issues and considerations in the meat sector (agenda item 11)**

34. At its 2022 session, the Specialized Section held a seminar which discussed sustainability issues in the meat sector, including assessments of the benefits and impact of livestock production. Following the suggestion for a follow-up seminar, a seminar on sustainable meat and livestock was held.

35. Ms. Hannah van Zanten, Associate Professor at Farming Systems Ecology, Wageningen University and Research presented “Circular food systems towards human and planetary health”. She referred to scientific articles validating the claim that animals can have an important role if we redesign today’s food system towards circular food systems. She explained that their role depends on how we redesign the food systems. She presented the results of three circularity scenarios, simulating the outcomes of different combinations of circularity, health, agriculture and population increases and the plausible corresponding effects on carbon dioxide emissions and protein per person per day. She noted that to redesign the food systems so that animals can play a role in the future, careful research based on a food systems approach was needed.

36. Mr. Peer Ederer, Founding Director, Global Observatory for Accurate Livestock Sciences (GOALSciences), and Director of the Global Food and Agribusiness Network, delivered a presentation “Towards a more sustainable and circular food system: The role of livestock”. He highlighted the Dublin Declaration of Scientists on the Societal Role of Livestock, which called for scientific evidence to be the basis for policy on livestock. He

further provided an update on progress of the PLANET food system explorer,<sup>1</sup> which is based on data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and provides a tool to explore in detail how biomass flow between different sectors and value chains. New features include flows for bioavailable protein. The tool can be used to explore the impacts of different scenarios on how biomass flows through the global food system.

37. Mr. John Gilliland, Professor of Practice for Agriculture & Sustainability, Queen's University Belfast gave a presentation "Circular economy transition in UNECE region: sustainable meat and livestock – A practitioner's view". He highlighted the importance of prioritizing soil health, using new measuring technologies to better capture actual change and the contribution of agriculture land in terms of carbon stock. He referenced a project that leverages technology and circular approach for both mitigation and building carbon stock, and the role of livestock in this. Lastly, he cited empirical research conducted to investigate the effects of grazing cattle on willow silvopastoral systems and its impact on animal performance and methane production.

38. Mr. Frank Mitloehner, Professor, University of California, Davis and Director of the CLEAR Center, delivered a presentation on "How managing methane can help livestock be part of a climate solution". He cited empirical data on global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by sectors which highlighted that agriculture, forestry and land use was the second leading sector in terms of its contribution to global GHG emissions. He emphasized that there are different ways of measuring the impact of methane, citing research that had developed an alternative metric (GWP\*) to characterize short-lived GHG compared to the commonly used measurement (GWP100) which overestimates methane's warming impact of constant herds and overlooks its ability to induce cooling when methane emissions are reduced. He noted that feed additives could have a potential for sector-wide methane reductions and could be feasibly implemented at existing operations.

39. Mr. Eran Raizman, Senior Animal Production Health Officer, FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, spoke on "Meat, livestock and food systems – beyond the buzz word", introducing the global mandate of FAO and how this contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. He highlighted contemporary challenges that pose a threat to the One Health approach (human, animal and ecosystem) such as risk of transboundary animal diseases, disease outbreaks including those of zoonoses, antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and climate change. Pointing to the increasing consumption of animal source foods in developing countries, and the amount of GHG emitted per kilogram of animal protein produced to meet this rising demand, he pointed to the problems associated with intensification rather than inclusive production, including related to manure management, water, air quality, landscape fragmentation, climate change and AMR.

40. Ms. Marg Will, Chief Executive Officer, Organic Systems & Solutions, delivered a presentation on "Sustainable livestock production: What role for standards?" She challenged the audience by posing the question to rethink what the word "sustainable" meant and answered that "it's a holistic system for continuous, concurrent improvement, better standards, cleaner systems, rigorous processes and adherence to all elements of environmental, societal and governance commitments". She shared insights on why standards need to be implemented for increased understanding, integrity, and consumer confidence. She further highlighted the need for independent development and regular review of standards, for engaging stakeholders, and for a strong system of compliance.

41. Mr. Ben Hill, principle of Bulliac Angus, Australia, and a Board Director at Angus Australia, presented on "Sustainable standards and the role of genetics". He highlighted the importance of environmental adaptability and the role of genetics in standards, the importance of managing for adaptability and animal welfare outcomes, and of identifying traits that make livestock more sustainable. He noted knowledge gaps to give livestock producers and processors the right tools, including a need for research on different traits for different regions, genomics or DNA sequencing, true feed efficiency as regards conversion of dry matter, gut biome, and how to ensure eating quality outcomes in a shorter timeframe.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://goalsciences.org/planet-food-system-explorer>.

42. The Specialized Section commended the speakers on their interesting presentations and the fruitful discussion that followed.

43. The Specialized Section discussed the outcomes of the seminar, reflecting on the link between sustainability and standards. The delegation of Australia noted that sustainability certification is a congested and confusing space for farmers and that it would be interesting to find out what is happening in more countries, and how to create standards without creating more confusion. It was noted that in the European Union the Directorate-General for Climate Action is leading on carbon removal credits. From a farmer's point of view, having better integrity is beneficial, as it leads to increased prices for carbon removals, and thus forensic measurement benefits farmers. It was also suggested for next year to invite carbon sequestration certification companies and the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, to broaden the seminar to other types of meat, and to include animal welfare and economic aspects.

#### **XIV. Other business (agenda item 12)**

44. The expert from Brazil informed about the seventieth International Congress of Meat Science and Technology (ICoMST) which will be held in Foz do Iguaçu, on 18–23 August 2024. He invited the Specialized Section to attend the event.

#### **XV. Future work (agenda item 13)**

45. The Specialized Section decided to place the following items on its agenda for 2024:

- Ovine standard review (led by Australia)
- Chicken standard review (led by the United States)
- Continued work on integrating HS codes into meat standards (led by Australia, and including Poland and the United States)
- Follow-up to the survey on the use of meat standards (secretariat with the Working Party Bureau)
- Rapporteur's group on full digitization of ECE bovine standard (led by Poland)
- Seminar on sustainable meat and livestock, broadening to other types of meat and including economic and animal welfare aspects.

#### **XVI. Election of officers (agenda item 14)**

46. The Specialized Section elected Ms. Jacqueline Mason (United States of America) as Chairperson and Mr. Ben Robinson (Australia) as Vice-Chairperson for a one-year period.

47. The Specialized Section thanked the outgoing delegate of Australia and current Chairperson of the Specialized Section, Mr. Ian King, for his many years of service and important contribution to the work of the Specialized Section for more than two decades, having served as Chairperson of the Specialized Section since 2007 and before that as Vice-Chairperson since 2000, and as a member since 1997.

#### **XVII. Adoption of the report (agenda item 15)**

48. The Specialized Section adopted the report of its thirty-first session (ECE/CTCS/WP.7/GE.11/2023/2) in session.

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