



Toward "safe trade"

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Until recently, the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) led a relatively quiet existence. A multilateral treaty established half a century ago, it was best known for its Phytosanitary Certificate, a standard form used by exporters to guarantee that domestic plants and plant products are free from plant pests specified by the importing country. But following the World Trade Organization's Agreements on Agriculture - and other international initiatives, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity - the IPPC finds itself charged with new responsibilities in the spheres of international trade, environmental protection, biotechnology and biosafety. We spoke with **Robert Griffin**, coordinator of the IPPC Secretariat based at FAO...

▶ Aren't "free trade" and "plant protection" sometimes conflicting objectives?

"Protection from the introduction and spread of harmful new plant pests is essential for food security. On the other hand, facilitation of trade is equally important to economic security. Although both are desirable objectives for any nation, they reflect very different types of interest, influence and practice. But they also overlap, particularly where trade in agricultural commodities is concerned. So what we are seeing is an evolution of the ideas of "free trade" and "fair trade" to embrace the concept of "safe trade" - that is to say, that protective measures are used to the extent justified by legitimate concerns, but not as unjustified barriers to trade."

▶ How does the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures [SPS agreement] facilitate "safe trade"?

"The SPS Agreement deals specifically with the issue of measures to protect plant, animal and human health and life, and represents a blueprint for establishing fair measures as well as for evaluating the measures of others. It is structured around several key principles, starting



with the right of a country to put protective measures in place. But it also obliges them to demonstrate that the measures are necessary and technically justified - they can only be maintained on the basis of scientific principles and evidence considered in the framework of a systematic evaluation process known as 'risk assessment'. Those that are found inappropriate should be modified. Transparency in the development and implementation of measures is critical throughout."

▶ What is IPPC's role in implementation of the SPS Agreement?

"A key point of the SPS Agreement is that countries have the option of basing their measures on risk assessment or on international standards. And the IPPC is the organization named in the Agreement as the source of international standards for phytosanitary measures. So our new role is to provide a neutral, international forum for dialogue and agreement on global phytosanitary issues. Standards, guidelines and recommendations developed under the IPPC not only provide useful guidance to governments, they are recognized under the SPS Agreement as the most appropriate means for harmonization."

► **How has the IPPC changed to meet its new responsibilities?**

"A series of consultations - with contracting parties to the Convention, regional plant protection organizations and FAO - were held to reach agreement on modifications that were needed to the Convention, and to provide a better structure for its future activities. This entailed the formation of the Secretariat, the launching of an ambitious programme of standard setting, and the negotiation of amendments to the Convention to better reflect contemporary practices and the IPPC's new role.

► **What is the process of setting phytosanitary standards?**

"We aim to establish three levels of standards: reference standards, concept standards, and specific standards. From drafting to final approval, development of an ISPM takes at least 12 months. Work on ISPMs may be initiated by the IPPC Secretariat according to specifications set by the ICPM, or drafts may be submitted by national or regional plant protection organizations. Draft standards are reviewed by the ICPM's Standards Committee and circulated to all member governments for comments before they are submitted to the ICPM for final adoption.

► **How many standards have been adopted so far?**

Since 1993, we have taken 13 standards through to final adoption and another five are in development. Among the most important ones adopted so far are principles of plant quarantine as related to international trade, guidelines for pest risk analysis, a glossary of phytosanitary terms, requirements for the establishment of pest free areas, and a code of conduct for the import and release of biological control agents. As additional standards are added and still greater detail is agreed upon, they will become increasingly more valuable. However, this framework of standards is already very useful to national plant protection organizations, particularly where pest management systems and regulatory decisionmaking have an important role in trade.

"By using standards to the extent possible for designing and implementing phytosanitary systems, countries reduce the level of analytical resources needed to design systems that can be expected to withstand the scrutiny of trading partners and also meet the obligations of governments under the IPPC and the SPS Agreement. The standards serve not only as models for developing measures, but also as reference points for evaluating or challenging measures."

► **IPPC is also playing a greater role in international cooperation on biosecurity and the environment. How did that come about?**

"The IPPC applies not only to protection of cultivated plants and plant products. Its mandate extends to the protection of natural flora and organisms that can cause indirect damage to plants, including invasive species such as weeds. The Convention therefore provides a framework for dealing with two important components of the Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD] - biosafety involving living modified organisms [LMOs] that result from biotechnology, and protection from invasive alien species that threaten ecosystems, habitats or species.

"In coordination with the CBD, a working group of the Interim Commission on Phytosanitary Measures is developing a detailed specification for a standard on pest risk analysis for LMOs and has identified several potential phytosanitary risks. The CBD has welcomed the recommendation for an ISPM on living modified organisms and will cooperate with the IPPC in developing an international standard for pest risk analysis involving LMOs. On invasive alien species, the ICPM is clarifying terminology, concepts and responsibilities in order to avoid inconsistencies in the areas of overlap between the environmental and phytosanitary frameworks. IPPC standards are being reviewed to ensure that they address environmental risks of plant pests adequately, and a supplementary standard on pest risk analysis is planned with a focus on environmental risk."