Proposal for an International Day of Potato

Executive Summary

Potato is one of the five most important crops in the world today, cultivated on over 20.7 million hectares across all continents (including at higher altitudes in tropical countries), and it is regularly consumed by billions of people.

Both common potato (*Solanum tuberosum* L.) and its wild relatives have wide genetic variation, with a range of traits, not yet widely used. There are over 5,000 hybrids, varieties and landraces of potatoes, many of which are restricted to the Altiplano region in Latin America.

The potato is of global importance to food security and nutrition, and small-scale producers depend on its sustainable cultivation to generate income, protect the environment and create social equity. The potato is one of the key staple crops that would benefit from advocacy initiatives towards realizing its potential to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely: SDG 1 – no poverty, SDG 2 – Zero Hunger, SDG 8 – decent work and economic growth, SDG 12 – responsible consumption and production, SDG 15 – life on land, and SDG 17 – partnerships for the goals.

An International Day of Potato is proposed to celebrate this crop and to draw attention to critical issues in the production chain, while ensuring its contribution to sustainable agriculture and achieving the SDGs.

Suggested action by the Committee

The Committee is invited to:

- **review** the proposal by the Government of Peru to establish the observance by the UN of an International Day of Potato (IDP), and provide guidance as deemed appropriate; and

- **endorse** the draft Conference Resolution, as contained in Annex A, and submit the proposal for approval by the 171th Session of the FAO Council and adoption by the 43rd Session of the FAO Conference for subsequent submission to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Queries on the substantive content of the document may be addressed to:

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I. Background

1. Potato (*Solanum tuberosum* L.) cultivation began 8,000 years ago in the South American Andes, specifically in the Altiplano of Peru and North-Western Bolivia. For pre-Hispanic cultures, the potato was vital in feeding the population and was available to everyone.

2. The potato was introduced from South America to Europe at the end of the sixteenth century by the Spanish. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, it reached China and later the Portuguese took it to India. Then, in the eighteenth century, potato arrived in Bhutan, Nepal and the Philippines, in the nineteenth century in East Africa and in the twentieth century in the Near East.

3. Currently the potato is produced in more than 150 countries and consumed worldwide, playing an important role in food security and nutrition security in many countries and serving as the basis of a vast industry with various types of processed products. The potato can be promoted as a healthy carbohydrate, antioxidant- and nutrient-rich food as part of a balanced diet complemented by vegetables and whole foods.

4. The potato is currently grown on over 20.7 million hectares with an estimated global production of 437 million tons\(^1\) and is consumed by billions people as a staple food.

5. In 2005, potato production in Africa, Asia, and Latin America exceeded production in developed countries for the first time, demonstrating its growing importance as a source of nutrition, employment, and income generation. For example, the commercial development of the potatoes native to the Andean zone (particularly Peru), where fresh and processed products are now commercialized for both national and international markets, is on the rise. This provides a significant source of income for small-scale farmers.

6. While the cultivated potato belongs to a single botanical species (*Solanum tuberosum* L.), there are several thousand improved varieties and over 150 wild relatives with significant genetic diversity and unique traits such as different sizes, shapes, colours, texture, qualities and tastes of tubers. Farmers conserve its vast biodiversity in state-of-the-art germplasm banks like the International Potato Center (CIP) in Peru, where a conservation strategy is implemented combining *in-situ* (in natural habitat and farmers’ fields) and *ex-situ* methods (Germplasm Banks).

7. In recognition of the global importance of the potato, UNGA declared 2008 as the International Year of the Potato to raise awareness of the need to promote research and development of sustainable production in low- and middle-income countries.

8. The potato is already celebrated by various countries to highlight the need for its sustainable production and consumption as a key component of national identities, food security and gastronomic versatilities.

9. For Peru, the potato is a very important crop with consumption per capita over 90 kg/year, the highest in Latin America. This is one of the reasons why the Peruvian Ministry of Agrarian Development and Irrigation (MIDAGRI) has been leading the celebration of the National Potato Day since 2005. The event brings together various actors in the potato chain: farmers, who have modernized their potato crop; producers’ organizations that are selecting and classifying their production in the field with local technology equipment; longshoremen; wholesale merchants; and private companies that are willing to invest on the development of processed products and of self-services that now widely distribute varieties of native potatoes. Similarly, other initiatives include cooking schools carrying out culinary research on native potatoes; restaurants offering a series of dishes based on the different varieties of potatoes; public and private institutions having generated support services based on demand; and, as a result, consumers seeking and finding quality products with greater commercial differentiation.

10. The contribution of potatoes to the global food supply is increasing, and potato consumption has more than doubled during the last thirty years. Asia is now fast approaching Europe as a major provider of potatoes.

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\(^{1}\) FAOSTAT. 2020.
global producer, with Bangladesh, China and India increasing potato yields and expanding cultivation areas. Africa has equally seen an increase in potato growing areas since 1990. Potato agriculture is associated with lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to other major crops and therefore can be seen as a climate-smart option, given that projected yield increases with adaptation to climate change.

II. Rationale for the establishment of an International Day of Potato (IDP)

11. Considering the fundamental role of the potato to global food security and nutrition, income generation, and the need for sustainable practices by small-scale farmers and value chain actors to ensure environmental protection and social equity, it is important to build on the success of the International Year of the Potato, celebrated in 2008, to generate global awareness through the establishment of an annual International Day of Potato.

12. The purpose of an IDP would be to increase awareness of critically important issues related to sustainable production and stable value chains, including water and fertilizer availability. Annual celebrations could involve various initiatives such as the production of advocacy materials, technical publications, documentaries, festivals, field demonstrations, webinars and other international, regional, national events, and the promotion of regional or global networks. Additionally, each year could bring a focus on key plant production and protection issues, including outbreaks of potato cyst nematode, late blight, Ralstonia as well as nutritional and other related issues, and the promotion of appropriate recipes to safeguard the nutritional contents of potato-derived cuisine.

III. Implementation mechanism

13. The International Day of Potato will be implemented by FAO Members with support of the FAO’s Plant Production and Protection Division (NSP) and in collaboration with other relevant FAO technical divisions, offices and specialized centres. During its celebration, the participation of scientific and academic institutions, the potato industry as well as producers and other international organizations will play a crucial role.

14. Each year the celebration will have a thematic focus including challenges to sustainable potato production and the efficient increase in productivity, availability, consumption, processing, product development and affordability, while promoting systems that utilize the great genetic diversity and diversification with other high economic and nutritional value species.

15. Support for the proposed proclamation of an IDP, led by the Government of Peru, has already been received from the Kingdom of Belgium, the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of Ireland and Provinces of Canada.
Annex A

Draft Conference Resolution

Recalling that the International Year of the Potato in 2008 has contributed to raising awareness of the role of the potato in agriculture, the economy and world food security;

Recognizing that the potato represents one of the most important contributions of the Andean region to the entire world, as it is one of the five main food crops consumed in the world, contributing to food security;

Recognizing that small-scale production of potato contributes greatly to conserving and use of biodiversity and supports efforts to reduce hunger, malnutrition and poverty;

Recalling the urgent need to raise awareness of the contribution of the potato as an invaluable food resource and as a generator of income for rural families and producers, with a view to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 Agenda;

Trusting that such an initiative would create a comprehensive platform to assess the problems and dynamics of sustainable potato production to transform agrifood systems;

Recognizing the decisive importance of this tuber crop for agricultural development, from the phase of pre-production, production, marketing, added value and promotion of consumption, highlighting the conservation of biodiversity, food security and nutrition, and standard setting;

Emphasizing that costs of activities related to the celebration of the International Day of Potato would be covered by voluntary contributions, including contributions from the private sector;

Requests the Director General to present this Resolution to the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations and the President of ECOSOC of the United Nations for informational purposes;

Requests FAO Member Nations to take the requisite steps to ensure the consideration of the Resolution to observe 30th May as International Day of Potato at forthcoming sessions of the United Nations General Assembly, as appropriate.