



Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures

COVID-19 INFORMATION SHARING SESSION – 24 JUNE 2020

WRITTEN SUMMARY - DRAFT

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. The SPS Committee held an information-sharing session on COVID-19 on 24 June 2020, preceding its informal and formal meetings. Requested by Members in May 2020, the session brought together Members, the Secretariat, the three standard-setting bodies Codex, IPPC and OIE, the WHO and other observers to share relevant information regarding the COVID-19 situation, including on SPS measures and related activities.¹

1.2. The session was held at the WTO headquarters, with most participants connecting through an online platform. Over 20 delegations took the floor to share their experiences in tackling the pandemic. The following bullet points summarize a few key points, while sections two to four below provide a more detailed account on the information.

- The WTO Secretariat has put in place a dedicated webpage² to facilitate access to information and analysis in relation to COVID-19, including a compilation of trade measures relating to goods, services and intellectual property adopted in the context of the pandemic. Out of the 175 notifications related to COVID-19, 40% had been submitted under the WTO's Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and 25% under the SPS Agreement.
- The SPS notifications received reveal that temporary restrictions on terrestrial and aquatic animals and animal products from affected areas were the most common initial reaction at the outset of the health crisis. Some of these restrictions were subsequently lifted as more information about virus transmission has become available. Since April 2020, most notifications have related to measures taken to facilitate trade, representing almost half of the total.
- A large segment of these trade facilitating measures concern streamlining certification and related procedures through electronic aids and other flexibilities, as also reported by several delegations during the session. Some Members have notified a permanent move to electronic phytosanitary certification based on the IPPC's e-Phyto Solution³, supported by the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF). Speakers from the IPPC and OIE encouraged the acceptance of electronic certification to minimise the pandemic's impact on the procedural aspects of trade, without compromising safety considerations.
- Codex, IPPC and OIE have adapted their standard-setting work to the situation, postponing meetings and/or moving to virtual or hybrid meetings, as necessary. The OIE has commenced work on risk-based standards and guidance on wildlife trade and recommends that COVID-related SPS measures be introduced only where necessary to protect human or animal health, based on risk analysis, and in line with relevant international standards.⁴ Speakers stressed that adherence to international standards and effective participation in

¹ The programme is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1795](#).

² https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/covid19_e.htm.

³ <https://www.ippc.int/en/ephyto/>.

⁴ https://www.oie.int/fileadmin/Home/eng/Our_scientific_expertise/docs/pdf/COV-19/A_COVID-19_Considerations_OIE_Sanitary_Measures.pdf.

standard-setting work is important to avoid – as one speaker put it – measures taken "because of action bias and not based on science".

- WHO and FAO have produced joint guidance for food businesses and food safety authorities on COVID-19 and food safety: "Guidance for Food Businesses"⁵ recommends additional measures to maintain the integrity of the food chain while protecting workers from contracting COVID-19, and "Guidance for competent authorities responsible for national food safety control systems"⁶ suggests how authorities can operate amid the pandemic in a way that will minimise disruptions to national food safety programmes and support producers and processors to keep safe food supply lines open. The WHO's International Health Regulations also play a central role, including in monitoring and disseminating information on domestic public health responses to the pandemic.
- Speakers emphasised consistently that maintaining and facilitating safe agricultural and food trade is key to mitigating the pandemic's negative effects on food security and livelihoods. In this context, many voiced a strong call for WTO Members to adhere to the core principles of the SPS Agreement – including transparency and scientific basis – in the design and implementation of their COVID response measures.
- Several developing country Members emphasised the challenges that the pandemic had brought, having to stretch limited resources to protect people's lives, ensure public health and guarantee food security. They urged Members to ensure the smooth functioning of agricultural and food supply chains and stressed a communication⁷ from over 30 Members from Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, requesting in particular the European Union to suspend its pesticide MRL review processes for a period of 12 months.

2 INFORMATION FROM WTO AND STDF

2.1. The session was opened by a presentation by the WTO Secretariat, outlining numbers and trends in COVID-19 related SPS notifications and other communications. At the beginning of the pandemic, the WTO created a dedicated web page⁸ compiling COVID-19 related information and analysis, including on measures on goods, services and intellectual property. The Secretariat reported that Members had submitted 175 COVID-related notifications and that 40% of these were on TBT measures and 25% on SPS measures. All SPS notifications can be retrieved from the SPS Information Management System (SPS IMS) using the COVID-19 SPS keywords filter or through the ePing e-mail alert system's COVID option.

2.2. The WTO Secretariat reported that in the first stages of the pandemic, Members had mainly notified emergency trade restrictions and increased certification requirements on the imports and transit of terrestrial or aquatic animals and animal products from affected areas to limit the spread of the virus. Subsequently, some of these restrictions had been lifted, which had been notified through addenda to the original notifications. The Secretariat explained that since April, most notifications from Members had related to measures taken to facilitate trade, which now represented almost half of the total. Often, these referred to the acceptance of photocopies or scanned versions of certificates. Some Members had also notified a permanent move to electronic phytosanitary certification based on the IPPC's ePhyto solution, supported by the STDF. The Secretariat's presentation is available in document [RD/SPS/112](#).⁹

2.3. The STDF explained that work was progressing through virtual practitioner groups and meetings, including the STDF Working Group, which had approved several new projects and project preparation grants in a virtual meeting in April. Knowledge sharing work on cross-cutting topics such as electronic certification and prioritization of SPS investments was on-going as planned. The pandemic's biggest impact had been felt in the STDF project portfolio, through cancelled capacity building activities and challenges to maintain governments' in-kind contributions at planned

⁵ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-food-businesses>.

⁶ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-competent-authorities-responsible-for-national-food-safety-control-systems>.

⁷ [G/SPS/GEN/1778/Rev.1](#). A second revision was circulated in [G/SPS/GEN/1778/Rev.2](#) on 25 June 2020. Reference is made to Rev.2 throughout this report.

⁸ https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/covid19_e.htm.

⁹ Restricted room document.

levels, among others. In May 2020, the STDF had organized a webinar on COVID-19, featuring all STDF partners (FAO, OIE, WHO, World Bank and WTO) and the Codex and IPPC Secretariats, to hear about different responses to the pandemic, both from a health and trade facilitation perspective. The STDF had also created a COVID-19 webpage with links to relevant activities by its partners.¹⁰

3 UPDATES FROM CODEX, IPPC AND OIE

3.1. Codex outlined how it had adapted its work to the situation, holding meetings in virtual or hybrid mode, as necessary. These included plans to hold a virtual Codex Alimentarius Commission meeting in September/October 2020 in order to take decisions based on the outcomes from committees from 2019. Codex already had several texts that were important in times of COVID-19, especially related to food hygiene but also on facilitating trade through import and export inspection and certification guidance. Progress was also being made on other topics of relevance to the current situation, including on internet sale of foods. Codex emphasised the importance of broad-based participation in standard-setting work and adherence to science-based international standards, even more so in a crisis such as the present one. All COVID-19 related information was available from a dedicated section accessible through the Codex website.¹¹ More information about Codex' COVID-related and other activities is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1790](#).

3.2. The OIE had worked on COVID-19 since January, when the link between the virus and animals had been established; in close cooperation with the WHO and FAO. It had initiated an informal advisory group that regularly shared information on the latest science and provided technical information to members, disseminated through a dedicated COVID questions and answers section on the OIE website.¹² Since February, members had filed reports to the OIE of animals infected with SARS-CoV-2, as the virus falls under the organization's reporting obligations as an emerging disease. The virus had been found among others on dogs and cats and was spreading on mink farms, but no food producing animals had yet been shown susceptible to it.

3.3. An OIE expert group focusing on the interface of COVID and safe trade in animals and animal products had been operational since February. As per its recommendations issued in May, OIE members should not introduce COVID-19 related sanitary measures unless these have been shown necessary to protect human or animal health, are scientifically justified by risk analysis, and in line with international standards.¹³ As such, implementation of OIE standards under the principles of the SPS Agreement was fully expected also amid the crisis, although the expert group had encouraged administrative flexibility on certain procedural aspects of trade such as acceptance of electronic certification. The OIE's wildlife working group¹⁴ had made a statement on wildlife trade and emerging zoonotic diseases, calling for actions to better regulate trade in wild animals given their prominent role in risk emergence. The OIE was also engaging with the WHO, FAO, UNEP, CITES and other stakeholders to develop a longer-term work programme aiming to better understand the dynamics and risks around wildlife trade and consumption. More information about the OIE's COVID-related and other activities is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1789](#), and the OIE's presentation at the session is available in document [RD/SPS/113](#).¹⁵

3.4. The IPPC stressed the importance of guaranteeing food security amid the crisis. Facilitating safe trade in plants and plant products played an essential role in this respect, given that 80% of food is plant based. The IPPC had continued its activities in virtual mode where possible, using online commenting tools which had facilitated work on draft standards. More information about the IPPC's activities is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1787](#).

¹⁰ <https://www.standardsfacility.org/stdf-partnership-updates-covid-19>.

¹¹ www.codexalimentarius.com.

¹² <https://www.oie.int/en/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019novel-coronavirus>.

¹³ https://www.oie.int/fileadmin/Home/eng/Our_scientific_expertise/docs/pdf/COV-19/A_COVID-19_Considerations_OIE_Sanitary_Measures.pdf.

¹⁴ <https://www.oie.int/?id=440#2812>.

¹⁵ Restricted room document.

4 UPDATES FROM MEMBERS AND OBSERVERS

4.1. The WHO provided an update on guidance that it had developed together with FAO on food safety. Guidance document "COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for Food Businesses"¹⁶ aimed to keep the virus out of the food supply chain and protect workers from COVID-19 infection. According to this guidance, it was highly unlikely that people contract COVID-19 from food or food packaging, as the primary transmission route was through person-to-person contact. WHO and FAO had also developed guidance on COVID-19 and food safety for competent authorities responsible for national food safety control systems¹⁷ to address e.g. a need for support in the reorganisation of food control activities during changing situations such as shifting consumption patterns and increased risk of food fraud. WHO had also issued new communications material as a result of a recent increase in COVID-19 outbreaks in and around packing houses and other food production sites and was finalising guidance on how to manage the risk of animal-carried diseases in 'wet' markets or other traditional markets.

4.2. The WHO also explained the role of the International Health Regulations (IHR) in monitoring and disseminating information on COVID-related measures. The IHR aim to prevent uncontrolled public health responses to crises and under them, countries are required to report within 48 hours any measures adopted on public health grounds, to be shared with all state parties of the organization. Notified measures had included among others travel bans, visa restrictions and quarantine of incoming travellers, and as specifically related to trade, import bans of food products and export bans and restrictions on medical equipment. The Emergency Committee convened by the WHO Director-General under the International Health Regulations, which had declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern in January, had recommended at its last meeting in April that countries impose measures restricting international trade and traffic only in accordance with the relevant international agreements.

4.3. Senegal explained how its food systems had adapted to the COVID-19 crisis, the main aim being the protection of workers within the production chain. The value of the country's main exports-the horticultural sector, groundnuts and cashews - had stood at 230 billion francs in 2019 but this upward trend risked falling as a result of the pandemic. Especially the cashew sector had experienced challenges because of work and movement restrictions and lesser import/export activity. Senegal reported that a handbook of good hygiene practices was being prepared by health authorities, to prevent further spread of COVID-19 in the country. This and other positive actions had shown a certain resilience of the phytosanitary control systems, benefiting especially the mango sector as compared to the previous year.

4.4. The European Union outlined its response to the crisis and explained that it would accept scanned copies of SPS certificates on a temporary basis until August 2020. It also welcomed other Members' trade facilitating measures to maintain an open trade of agri-food products. The European Union expressed concerns regarding additional COVID-19 related tests, inspections and other requirements imposed on imported food products, and recalled that according to the WHO and the European Food Safety Authority, there was no evidence that food could be a source of virus transmission. The European Union's full statement is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1799](#).¹⁸

4.5. Colombia explained that it would accept scanned copies of SPS certificates for the duration of the pandemic to facilitate open trade of food and agricultural products and thanked other Members that had done the same. It echoed a group of more than 30 Members from Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia who had requested the European Union to suspend its ongoing pesticide MRL review processes on account of the pandemic in communication [G/SPS/GEN/1778/Rev.2](#).¹⁹ Colombia explained that COVID-19 infections had risen to over 70,000 in June and that national resources were largely harnessed to combat the disease. Colombia's full statement is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1817/Rev.1](#).

¹⁶ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-food-businesses>.

¹⁷ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-competent-authorities-responsible-for-national-food-safety-control-systems>.

¹⁸ The European Union subsequently submitted document [G/SPS/GEN/1814](#), providing responses to the requests in communication [G/SPS/GEN/1778](#).

¹⁹ Some speakers referred to previous versions of this document.

4.6. Chile outlined measures that it had adopted to minimise the pandemic's negative effects on trade flows. By instructions of the Chilean Ministry for Health, regional authorities were accepting customs documents and SPS certificates in electronic format; in addition, the Agriculture and Livestock Service had waived physical inspections of consignments presenting low phytosanitary risk, and physical inspections of vessels at maritime ports had been reduced. Chile had provided a new tool which allowed exporters to upload SPS certificates in PDF format rather than presenting them on paper, and all export authorizations valid as at March 2020 that were about to expire would be renewed for a year.

4.7. Chile also briefed the Committee about joint work on electronic SPS certification with Argentina, Peru, Colombia and the United States, based on the IPPC's ePhyto solution. In the field of fisheries and aquaculture, Chile had been working towards online verification of certificates as well as innovations towards remote inspection and automatization. Lastly, Chile recalled that at present, there was no scientific evidence that the SARS-CoV-2 virus spread through food products and cautioned Members against adopting SPS measures that were more trade restrictive than necessary. More information about Chile's COVID-related activities is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1770](#).

4.8. Canada explained that it had led the development of the joint statement "Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic with open and predictable trade in agricultural and food products" of 22 April with 29 WTO Members²⁰, underlining their commitment to a coordinated global response to combat the crisis. Canada was confident that the measures it had taken provided assurances that food and food products consumed domestically and exported from Canada were safe and fully met all importing countries' requirements. In this respect, Canada recalled that according to FAO/WHO guidance, there was no evidence that food or food packaging transmitted the virus. Canada urged all Members to base their COVID-related measures on science and international guidance, including that issued by FAO/WHO and the OIE. Canada's full statement is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1809](#).

4.9. Paraguay was implementing certain trade-facilitating measures in the form of e-certificates of origin and other procedures, and as a landlocked developing country, noted the importance of such measures to guarantee food security during the crisis. COVID-19 had presented major human and economic challenges that were felt especially in developing countries whose resources were largely needed to combat the disease. Paraguay drew the Committee's attention to communication [G/SPS/GEN/1778/Rev.2](#) in which it had, together with 30 Members from Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, requested the European Union to suspend its on-going MRL review processes for a period of 12 months. Paraguay hoped to receive a positive reply from the European Union on this matter.

4.10. Argentina drew attention to communication [G/SPS/GEN/1772](#), where it had described measures and tools put in place to facilitate the submission and acceptance of phytosanitary certificates. Concerning exports from Argentina, relevant operators could check the validity of phytosanitary certificates through an electronic validation code, through the IPPC's ePhyto system, as well as through a blockchain-enabled system. Regarding imports to Argentina, the requirement to submit an original paper-based phytosanitary certificate could be waived, provided that a digital version of the certificate with a mechanism to verify its validity was submitted.

4.11. Australia thanked Members for accepting alternative SPS certification and allowing remote auditing in order to facilitate trade. It recalled that all measures, including those applied to the importation of food, must be evidence-based and supported by science, also stressing that according to the WHO, there was no evidence that COVID-19 was transmitted by food or food packaging.

4.12. Korea explained that it had decided with trading partners, including Australia, the European Union and New Zealand, to accept electronic copies of export certificates while waiting for the original versions. This had not caused issues in customs clearance and movement of agricultural and food products, and Korea hoped to engage with WTO Members to jointly address COVID-19 related challenges.

4.13. China thanked WTO Members and the international community at large for their support during the fight against COVID-19. The spread of the pandemic had been blocked effectively and normal life and production restored, but China was also facing the risk of a rebound of the virus in

²⁰ [WT/GC/208](#) - [G/AG/30](#).

the country. China called all WTO Members to work together to combat the virus and made three suggestions in this respect. First, China urged Members to adhere to WTO rules and guidance by the WHO and FAO to facilitate the flow of safe trade and to ensure an open, stable and secure supply chain. Second, China wished to see solid cooperation in the provision of anti-pandemic materials and daily necessities, and third, made a general call for an open environment for international trade. China had adopted many trade-facilitating measures and notified them to the WTO.

4.14. Brazil highlighted the importance of the SPS Agreement in times of crisis, urging Members to base their SPS measures on science in order to avoid arbitrary or unjustifiable trade barriers. It recalled the importance of guaranteeing food security by ensuring a reliable supply of agri-food products and explained that it had implemented electronic signatures on phytosanitary certificates to decrease physical contact and make the process more efficient. This measure had been notified to the WTO under symbol [G/SPS/N/BRA/1642](#).

4.15. Indonesia outlined measures that it had taken in response to COVID-19. These included: validation of digital SPS certificates as notified in document [G/SPS/N/IDN/134](#), measures on the importation of live animals as notified in document [G/SPS/N/IDN/133](#), and certain measures concerning fishery products for food safety reasons. Indonesia thanked Members and observer organizations for their updates and highlighted the importance of information sharing in tackling the pandemic.

4.16. Peru reported on the issuance of digital SPS certificates on fisheries and aquaculture products in response to COVID-19, as detailed in document [G/SPS/GEN/1783](#). For Peruvian imports, the submission of paper certificates could be exempted provided that a validation mechanism was used. Peru urged Members to apply reciprocal measures for the acceptance of SPS certificates with digital signature. It also had in place a single window for certificates for processed food.

4.17. Ecuador referenced the WHO/FAO guidance document on food safety, noting that it was very unlikely for COVID-19 to spread by food, given that the virus needed an animal or human host to multiply. Ecuador further recalled that the SPS Agreement requires Members to take into account the special needs of developing countries when designing and implementing SPS measures. Ecuador restated its support for the joint communication [G/SPS/GEN/1778/Rev.2](#), requesting the European Union to suspend its ongoing pesticide MRL review processes for a period of 12 months. Ecuador also drew Members' attention to document [G/SPS/GEN/1771](#), where it had invited Members to accept digital copies of phytosanitary export certificates when exporters are unable to send physical copies to importers. The Ecuadorian Agency for Plant and Animal Health Regulation had launched an online platform to facilitate the process of viewing and verifying electronic certificates.

4.18. The United States reiterated its commitment to protecting public health and complying with its obligations under the SPS Agreement. The US regulatory agencies were working with their counterparts to share scientific evidence about the virus and information about the approaches taken to protect consumers and maintain trade. The United States called attention to the introduction of certain food safety measures which had created escalating confusion and consternation across food supply chains. The United States asked that all Members base their actions to protect public health and safety amid the COVID-19 pandemic on scientific principles and evidence of risk, and to avoid unnecessary barriers to food trade vital to global food security. The United States' full statement is available in document [G/SPS/GEN/1798](#). New Zealand aligned itself with the US statement.

4.19. The Russian Federation explained that it had established a crisis centre to support coordination and develop a coherent approach to preventing the spread of the virus. Its Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance was fully engaged to analyse the disease transmission routes and guarantee a safe supply of animal and plant products. The Russian research centre for animal health had developed a technique of isolating SARS-CoV-2 in biological samples, paving the way for diagnostic testing of COVID-19 in animals and at present, samples from close to 60 animals had been tested. Laboratory experiments performed by Russian researchers had also independently confirmed the conclusion made by Chinese and American researchers related to airborne virus transmission in certain situations. The development of a coronavirus test kit had allowed the removal of temporary restrictions on exotic and ornamental animals from China, and work on experimental COVID vaccines was underway.

4.20. Mexico thanked Members for adopting trade facilitating measures in the context of the public health emergency, essential for the circulation of foodstuffs and medical equipment. It echoed Australia, Chile, Ecuador, the European Union and the United States in expressing concerns regarding certain restrictions on foodstuffs that generate unnecessary costs to exporters and consumers. Mexico considered that these measures could violate the SPS Agreement, recalling that SPS measures must be transparent and backed by science and international standards.

4.21. Chinese Taipei explained that due to COVID-19 related delays and cancellations in airfreight and courier mail services, it had adopted temporary alternative arrangements for the presentation of SPS certificates, as notified in documents [G/SPS/N/TPKM/526](#) and [G/SPS/N/TPKM/530](#). These measures would remain in force at least until 30 June 2020, when the custom territory's competent authorities would reassess the situation. Chinese Taipei noted that the pandemic was sustained by human-to-human transmission and therefore urged Members to base any trade bans and restrictions on animals and animal products on international guidance and science. Chinese Taipei had adopted measures to deter COVID-19 already before its first confirmed case and had been successful in limiting the total number of local infections to 446 in a period of over 66 days.

4.22. Guatemala urged Members to avoid any SPS measures not backed by science in line with the SPS Agreement in the fight against the pandemic, noting the negative effect of unduly restrictive measures on rural development and livelihoods. Echoing several previous delegations, Guatemala referenced document [G/SPS/GEN/1778/Rev.2](#) and requested the European Union to suspend all its ongoing MRL review processes for a period of 12 months. Guatemala was witnessing approximately 700 positive COVID cases per day and had adopted movement restrictions, including a temporary suspension of all public transport.
