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Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures

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USE OF REMOTE (VIRTUAL) AUDIT AND VERIFICATION IN REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

WTO SPS COMMITTEE – PROPOSED THEMATIC SESSION

COMMUNICATION FROM AUSTRALIA

Revision

The following document, received on 13 October 2021, is being circulated at the request of the Delegation of Australia.

As per the request from the Chair of the WTO Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures at the Committee's meeting on 15-16 July 2021, the Delegation of Australia submitted for consideration an initial proposal for a thematic session on remote audit and verification in regulatory frameworks to be held in 2022 ([G/SPS/GEN/1949](#)). This paper further elaborates on that proposal and outlines a potential agenda for the thematic session.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the development and utilisation of alternative assessment measures, such as remote audit, in regulatory practice relating to the food supply chain. These measures will become increasingly relevant to regulators and food businesses in the post-pandemic world.

1.2. Greater utilisation of these measures has increased Members' awareness of the benefits of utilising remote audit to either complement or substitute for more traditional assessment methods. It has also provided valuable lessons in what regulatory reforms are needed to enable effective application and the recognition of remote audit as a legitimate tool for this purpose.

1.3. There are numerous considerations associated with the use of these alternative assessment measures, including:

- The cost, effectiveness, reliability and accessibility of such innovative tools and approaches;
- The effectiveness of the remote assessment process and outcomes compared to traditional audits and inspections;
- The consistency of application internationally to maintain robust outcomes and confidence in these assessment activities;
- Ensuring auditors sufficiently understand the broader national food control system context within the exporting country;
- The need for agreed scope for the assessment activity or interpretation of relevant international standards, especially with respect to how a required outcome may be achieved using remote audit or inspection; and
- The potential need for agreement on principles or standards for the use of alternative assessment measures to facilitate international trade in food.

1.4. Australia considers that the SPS Committee could convene a thematic session on the topic of 'Use of remote audit and verification in regulatory frameworks' to build greater understanding of

how such tools can support robust regulatory practices and assist Members to meet their requirements under Annex C of the SPS Agreement.

1.5. Australia suggests that the objective of this session would be to provide Members with an enhanced understanding of the state of international developments in this emerging area, including the role of remote audit and verification in supporting regulatory frameworks; facilitate the sharing of Members' experiences in the application of remote audit; provide an update on the status of international guidance being developed; and facilitate discussion of the overall benefits and the barriers to the uptake of remote audit.

1.6. The session would draw on the current work and perspectives of international standard-setting bodies (ISSBs), such as the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS) work on remote audit and verification in regulatory frameworks, as well as international best practice and analysis in this emerging area.

1.7. With international guidance still evolving in this area, the thematic session would provide a valuable opportunity to take stock of these developments and to engage a wider range of Members and observers, including through understanding of the technology, its regulatory applications, and the need for development of international guidance.

2 PROPOSAL

2.1. Australia would like to propose the following:

- a. that the SPS Committee convene a thematic session on the topic of 'Use of remote audit and verification in regulatory frameworks' to build greater understanding of how such tools can support robust regulatory practices and assist Members to meet their requirements under Annex C of the SPS Agreement.
- b. that Members and the ISSBs propose ideas for the content of this thematic session, as well as provide their views on the proposed objectives of the session.

2.2. Australia would also welcome Members' comments on the proposed indicative agenda for the session (see below).

**SPS COMMITTEE THEMATIC SESSION 2022
USE OF REMOTE AUDIT AND VERIFICATION IN REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS
AGENDA (INDICATIVE)**

1. What is remote audit and how is it important in supporting regulatory frameworks?
 - Forms of remote assessment, such as review of documentation and video inspection.
 - Importance of use during pandemic and continuing importance post-pandemic.
2. The benefits of remote audit in facilitating international agri-food trade.
 - Providing assurances for importing countries and facilitating international trade in animals, plants and food.
 - The need for international guidance to ensure fair practice.
 - Reducing transaction costs in international trade.
3. International best practice in remote audit.
 - Countries perspectives on remote audit: Import and export case studies.
 - Business perspectives on remote audit: Case studies.
4. International standards development on remote audit.
 - Codex Alimentarius Commission CCFICS Working Group on Remote Audit and Verification.
 - Other international standards organisations' perspectives.
5. Panel discussion – The future for remote audit: Opportunities and challenges.
