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Keynote Address - Speech by H.E. Jari Leppä, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland

Agenda item 2

Prepared by Minister of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland

Excellencies, Honourable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure and a privilege for me to address you at this opening of the 15th Session of the Commission on Phytosanitary Measures of the International Plant Protection Convention. While it is an honour to address you, there remains a trace of regret that I cannot do that in person as I originally planned it.

Finland is a country of the north! Our harsh winters have moulded the resilience of our inhabitants and have shaped our ecosystems to cope with the climatic conditions. This limits our agricultural production but at the same time also ensures pure and high quality agricultural products, which fulfil the highest food safety and phytosanitary standards. However, plant pests threaten our agriculture and forestry, and our ecosystems too. The dramatic increase in travel and international trade, and climate change have amplified the risk of invasive plant pests and diseases being introduced into our agriculture and environment. We are already seeing an increase in pest introductions in Finland.

Here in Finland, we are proud of our agriculture and we are proud that our production systems and phytosanitary infrastructures are of high quality. However, no country by itself can limit the spread of pests and diseases, regardless of how developed its economy is. Pests and diseases don't carry passports and observe immigration requirements. The prevention of the spread of such organisms is very much an international undertaking requiring the collaboration of all countries. In order to strengthen the national, regional and international resolve to combat such pests and diseases, Finland proposed to celebrate the year 2020 as the International Year of Plant Health.

It was our intention to raise worldwide public awareness on important issues concerning plant health. On how plant health contributes to food security, poverty reduction and the preservation of biodiversity. We wanted to show politicians around the world how plant health contributes to the realization of the UN Development Agenda, and we intended to demonstrate that plant health does not only concern agriculture, but is also interconnected with environmental degradation and climate change. Our aim was to establish an understanding around the world that plant health is as important for the environment and livelihoods as human health is to the well-being of people.

The International Year of Plant Health started well. We had a very detailed blueprint for public awareness campaigns in Finland, and the FAO and the IPPC had ambitious plans for the year. The international plant health community was ready to demonstrate its role to a wider audience and to show the solutions it can provide to some of the most pressing issues of our time. A number of activities were

undertaken in the first two months of 2020 and we had every reason to believe that the International Year of Plant Health would be a success. However, this was not to be.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in history there are certain events which have defined our species and our social development profoundly. The Covid-19 pandemic, which took off in early 2020, will most certainly be one of those global events that shape our societies and our behaviours into the future. It definitely shaped the International Year of Plant Health, because travel restrictions, worldwide lockdowns and reduced physical interactions between people led to cancellations and postponements of physical events such as trade fairs, seminars, meetings and conferences.

Naturally this also affected the flagship event of the International Year of Plant Health – the first International Plant Health Conference. Finland's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry had high ambitions when offering to the FAO and the IPPC to host this first ever international gathering of plant health experts. Instead, we first had to postpone the conference first until June 2021, and six weeks ago we then had to cancel it completely because of the Covid-19 situation and the persistence of strict international travel restrictions. As you can imagine, this has been a huge disappointment for me and my staff in Helsinki. All public awareness activities for the International Year of Plant Health had to be moved to social media and virtual meetings and webinars.

Although the pandemic has had such a huge impact on the activities of the International Year of Plant Health, I feel it has also brought new opportunities to the plant health community. For instance, it is now possible to demonstrate to a much better aware public that plant health epidemics can spread as fast as human health epidemics. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, we can also demonstrate convincingly that, as with human health, prevention is critical and that preventing the introduction of plant pests is more economical by far than dealing with a full-blown plant health emergency. The fact that in many cases it is impossible to eradicate introduced plant pests and diseases, and that the long-term costs associated with their control are borne by producers and society, should give us the motivation to make a case for better prevention in the future.

For these reasons, I think the Covid-19 pandemic has perhaps strengthened the case for better plant health. The global community will and must understand that our health and well-being does not depend on the occurrence and spread of a single harmful organism, such as the coronavirus, but on environmental health and biodiversity in general. We will not be able to prevent the next human, animal or plant health pandemic in the future unless we tackle climate change and environmental degradation as well. The One Health approach highlights that the health of our environment ultimately determines the health of us humans who are part of it and must live in it.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my strong belief that we must strengthen plant health at all levels - national, regional and global. I am convinced that strong international cooperation on plant health will be one of the main pathways to success in preventing the international spread of plant pests. We need to build up sustainable plant health structures nationally, regionally and globally, which do not fluctuate in resourcing depending on the occurrence or non-occurrence of a crisis.

The IPPC and its Commission on Phytosanitary Measures are leading the way in our fight to keep our plants and thus our environment healthy. We need your cooperation, your energy and your knowledge to find meaningful ways to prevent the spread of plant pests. The FAO, the IPPC and the Regional Plant Protection Organizations are the beacons in our efforts to ensure that our plants stay healthy.

Humanity is facing a number of existential challenges. The IPPC, Regional Plant Protection Organizations and National Plant Protection Organizations are placed centre stage for addressing some of these challenges. It is our duty to provide them with the opportunity and resources to do that. It would certainly be my dream that in 30 years' time the year 2020 would not only be remembered for the Covid-19 pandemic, but also as the beginning of a new international consciousness about One Health, including plant and environmental health!

Excellencies, Honourable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your kind attention.