

MINUTES OF THE IPPC EPHYTO STEERING GROUP (ESG) VIRTUAL MEETING

6 February 2024 (14.00-15.00, Rome Time UTC+1)

1. Opening of the Meeting

- [1] The IPPC Secretariat (hereafter referred to as the “Secretariat”) opened the meeting and welcomed the participants.

2. Meeting arrangements

- [2] There were no comments from the participants on the proposed agenda of the meeting ([Appendix 1](#)).

3. Administrative matters

- [3] The Secretariat introduced the two meeting documents: the agenda and the draft minutes of the ESG Meeting held in January.
- [4] The list of participants is provided in [Appendix 2](#).
- [5] Regarding the adoption of the minutes of the January meeting, this was postponed to the next March meeting as some participants could not read them before adoption.
- [6] In addition, regarding the minutes of December meeting approved in January, and after having addressed one additional comment (see below chapter 4.1) from the Europe representative, the ESG:
- (1) *approved* the amended minutes of the ESG Meeting held on 12 December 2023.

4. IPPC Secretariat update

4.1 Connection to digital platforms

- [7] As a follow-up to the December ESG meeting (see minutes, Chapter 4.2.2, paragraphs 14 to 18) the participants further discussed this item.
- [8] Following a comment from the Europe representative on the minutes of the December meeting, ESG members discussed whether the company would receive or retrieve ePhytos as it is a channel forwarding (see Figure in paragraph 16 of the minutes of December meeting).
- [9] Thus, the UNICC representative explained that in the case of ePhytos forwarded to TRACES NT, it is an automated rule for all certificates sent to EU Member States. In the case of forwarding an ePhyto to a digital platform, it is based on what is indicated in the envelope of the message; the decision of forwarding the ePhyto is made by the exporter when applying the certificate request to the NPPO of the exporting country. The company managing the digital platform can retrieve the ePhyto upon exporter decision only and if the exporting NPPO agrees to issue the certificate. At the end of the discussion the ESG concluded the term “retrieve” would be more appropriate for those ePhytos directed to a digital platform and amended the minutes of December meeting accordingly (replacing two times the word “receive” by “retrieve” in paragraph 15).
- [10] In addition, and regarding the sentence “WaveBL is the first company to come along but many other companies raised this issue historically.” in paragraph 15 of the minutes of December meeting, the Chair provided some explanations. He explained that historically all big shipping lines have asked for paperless certificates because the last thing they want is a commodity to get on a boat and then it doesn't have an ePhyto and then they can't discharge it when it arrives. He added that banking institutions have also asked for the possibility to have ePhytos as paper certificates are subject to fraud. He also specified

that WaveBL company manages shipping documents and bills of lading and their clients (exporters and importers) want to attach all documents automatically and electronically, including ePhytos.

- [11] He added that at this stage, this would be operated first with the GeNS as a pilot phase so that all countries using the GeNS would have the option to select WaveBL as a recipient of an ePhyto issued. Instead, for those countries having their national system, WaveBL will have to get associated with them.
- [12] Furthermore, to add this feature to the IPPC ePhyto Solution, i.e., to be able to forward ePhytos to digital platforms, would imply collecting money from them through an annual subscription. Therefore, this will contribute to addressing some of the concerns over long term sustainability and funding of the IPPC ePhyto Solution.
- [13] The UNICC representative emphasized the importance of being transparent with countries on this new feature i.e., the forwarding channel to digital platforms. In this regard, the Chair added that it is important to inform exporting countries that this new feature is optional and is not an International Standard for Phytosanitary Measures (ISPM) prescription.
- [14] At the end of the discussion, the participants concluded it is worth trying to set up connections with digital platforms as an optional forwarding channel for exporting countries, but considering that three out of seven regions were represented at the today meeting to agree on this project, the ESG:
- (2) *invited* the Secretariat to send a message to ESG members that could not attend the today meeting and ask them whether they agree to go forward with the project of allowing digital platforms to retrieve ePhytos if the exporter decides it, with a deadline for response of two weeks, and implicitly considered as approved if there is no negative response.

4.2 Non-compliant ePhytos with the XML mapping

- [15] The Europe representative indicated that the TRACES NT Team had sent to UNICC some examples of non-compliant ePhytos. They will continue to send some examples so that the UNICC could then requalify some warning issues into severe ones and reach an agreement hopefully.
- [16] The UNICC representative confirmed that IPPC Hub Application release notes are scheduled by the end of March to requalify some critical warning issues into severe ones for ePhytos not compliant with the ISPM 12 XML mapping.
- [17] The Europe representative then asked whether there is a need for the ESG to decide which warning issues should be requalified into severe ones. The Chair responded that it is not possible to requalify all warnings and took the example of those ePhytos with warnings because they exceed the length of one of the fields based on the ISPM 12 schema.
- [18] The UNICC representative then suggested to requalify progressively with a priority on the structure of the schema to be respected and where they are codes that need to be respected too. The rest should be kept as warnings. As countries mature, it will be possible to requalify more and more warnings as severe. He suggested, as a future ESG agenda item, to make proposals on issues to be requalified from warning to severe.
- [19] Responding to a question from the Secretariat on whether the requalification into a severe issue meant that the message would be blocked and could not go through the hub, the UNICC representative responded that it depends. By default, the hub does not have any validation of messages (ePhytos) sent; it is up to the exporting country to use or not the validation tool upfront that accepts or not the message sent to the hub, while the UNICC strongly suggests to the exporting country to use it. Instead, when the validation tool is used on the receiving side, feedback is automatically provided to the exporting country in case of warning or severe issue. At the end of the discussion, the ESG:

- (3) *invited* the UNICC to share at the March ESG meeting the warning issues that could be requalified into severe ones, before the next IPPC Hub Application release notes scheduled at the end of March.
- (4) *invited* the UNICC to inform the countries through the IPPC Hub Application release notes including the accompanying email that improvements of XML mapping compliance are underway and progressively some warning issues will be requalified into severe ones.

[20] The Chair added that there are also a growing number of challenges with cross and mixed commodities and a solution will need to be figured out for that. The UNICC representative also mentioned, as another improvement, that the commodities should have in the future their associated Harmonized System (HS) code established by the World Customs Organization (WCO), in addition of the European and Mediterranean Plant Protection organization (EPPO) code that can already be used in the GeNS. In this regard, the Europe representative mentioned that TRACES NT has already the combination of the EPPO and HS codes for each commodity as it is required for establishing the Common Health Entry Document for Plants and Plant Products (CHED-PP) at EU import. She then indicated that she would check whether it is possible to provide those databases with a view to improving the IPPC ePhyto Solution. Indeed, this can be very useful for instance to recognize with Artificial Intelligence (AI) the appropriate additional declaration for a specific country. Despite there is an optional field in the XML schema for the HS code, the Chair added that only the first six digits of HS codes are universal but are not enough to make phytosanitary decisions. The ESG concluded that fixing cross and mixed commodities remains the priority now and moving forward commodity codification is a long-term goal.

4.3 Other updates

- [21] The IPPC Secretariat informed the participants that on 9 January 2024, the Secretariat, and the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation (GATF) met to discuss partnership on ePhyto implementation at country level, more specifically in Africa.
- [22] It appears that the GATF is keen to further support ePhyto implementation in Africa with other partners and therefore the Secretariat agreed to organize a workshop in Rome, Italy, on 22 and 23 February 2024. This workshop will aim at gathering key organizations to develop an ePhyto implementation project in Africa and define their respective roles.
- [23] Representatives from the GATF, Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF), TradeMarkAfrica (TMA), African Union Inter African Phytosanitary Council (AU-IAPSC), Industry Advisory Group (IAG) will participate together with the UNICC and IPPC Secretariat.

5. Regional updates

- [24] As anticipated in December 2023, the Chair informed that Canada started the second week of January to send ePhytos in production to the United States of America (USA) but did not know when they will expand to other countries. He also indicated that Canada is likely not ready to accommodate the digital signature to send ePhytos to the EU nor to receive anything from any country so far. In addition, he informed that the USA are actively testing with Thailand.
- [25] The Europe representative informed that they are testing with Thailand and Burkina Faso. She also indicated that there is an issue with some countries choosing the UN/LOCODE of the entry point but inserting as a free text the ISO country code that does not correspond to and, requested whether it would be possible to implement this in the GeNS so that the UN/LOCODE is in the right country. The UNICC representative responded they will be fixing this, not in the next IPPC GeNS Application release notes, but the one after. In addition, and as UN/LOCODE are available for all EU Member States entry points, the UNICC representative indicated that it should be possible to fix this in the GeNS in a way it is not possible to insert free text (when an EU Member States is selected, you will have to choose one of the UN/LOCODE proposed).

[26] Following a question from the Southwest Pacific representative on progress for GeNS enhancement project to be funded by New Zealand, the UNICC representative indicated that he was currently working with Mr Peter Neimanis from PACER Plus Organization to define the scope of the project. He added that a draft agreement between UNICC and IPPC will be prepared by the end of the month, hopefully, as funds from New Zealand will be released through the IPPC Multi Donor Trust Fund.

6. Any other business

[27] There was no other business.

7. Date of the next meeting

[28] The next ESG monthly meeting is scheduled for 5 March 2024 at 2.00 pm, Rome Time (UTC+1).

8. Close of the meeting

[29] The Chair thanked the participants for their active participation.

Action List

Action	Responsible	Deadline
1. Inform the CPM-Bureau that ESG needs better participation at meetings, with all regions represented, so that participants can agree without any problem on items discussed.	Secretariat	12 April 2024
2. Send a message to ESG members that could not attend the today meeting and ask them whether they agree to go forward with the project of allowing digital platforms to retrieve ePhytos if the exporter decides it, with a deadline for response of two weeks, and implicitly considered as approved if there is no negative response.	Secretariat	7 February 2024
3. As regards ePhyto non-compliance with the XML mapping, share with ESG members the warning issues that could be requalified into severe ones in the next IPPC Hub Application release notes scheduled at the end of March.	UNICC	5 March 2024
4. Inform countries in the next IPPC Hub Application release notes on improvements of the XML mapping and warning issues requalified into severe ones.	UNICC	31 March 2024
5. Check whether it is possible to provide the EPPO and HS code databases available in TRACES NT to the IPPC ePhyto Solution.	Europe representative	5 March 2024

Appendix 1**AGENDA OF THE EPHYTO STEERING GROUP MEETING****6 February 2024, 14:00–15:00 Rome Time (UTC+1)**

	Agenda Item	Document No.	Presenter
1.	Opening of the Meeting		IPPC Secretariat
2.	Meeting Arrangements		
2.1	Adoption of the Agenda	2024-02_ESG_01_Agenda	Chair
3.	Administrative Matters		
3.1	Review of meeting documents		IPPC Secretariat
3.2	Meeting Participants	ESG Membership list	IPPC Secretariat
3.3	Approval of minutes of previous meeting	2024-01_ESG_Meeting_Minutes_Draft	IPPC Secretariat
4.	IPPC Secretariat updates		
4.1	Connection to digital platforms		IPPC Secretariat
4.2	Non-compliant ePhytos with the XML mapping		IPPC Secretariat
4.3	Other updates		IPPC Secretariat
5.	Regional updates		
	Updates of activities in the FAO Regions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Africa - Asia - Europe - Latin America and Carribean - Near East - North America - Southwest Pacific 		Regional representatives
6.	UNICC updates		UNICC
7.	Any other business		Chair
8.	Date of the next meeting		IPPC Secretariat
9.	Close of the Meeting		Chair

Appendix 2**EPHYTO STEERING GROUP (ESG) MEETING PARTICIPANT LIST****6 February 2024, 14:00–15:00 Rome Time (UTC+1)**

Region / Role	Name / Organization	Email address
Europe Member	Ms Helene KLEIN Directorate SANTE.DDG2.G (Crisis management in food, animals and plants) European Commission DG Health and Food Safety	Helene.KLEIN@ec.europa.eu
North America Member (ESG Chair)	Mr Christian B DELLIS United States Department of Agriculture, Animal, Plant Health Inspection Service, Plant Protection and Quarantine	christian.b.dellis@usda.gov
Southwest Pacific Member	Mr Piriariki MAAO Biosecurity Service Ministry of Agriculture Cook Islands	piriariki.maa@cookislands.gov.ck
UNICC	Mr Gianluca NUZZO Solutions Delivery Manager Digital Business Solutions Section (DDD)	nuzzo@unicc.org
	Mr Dominique MENON IPPC Secretariat / IFU ePhyto Programme Officer	dominique.menon@fao.org