

MINUTES OF THE IPPC EPHYTO STEERING GROUP (ESG) VIRTUAL MEETING 5 March 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 four meeting documents: the agenda, the draft minutes of the ESG meetings held in January and February 2024 and the paper to be submitted to the Standards Committee (SC) on “ePhyto Steering Group (ESG) recommendation to add ePhyto definition in the Glossary of phytosanitary terms”.
- [4] The list of participants is provided in [Appendix 2](#).
- [5] Regarding the adoption of the minutes of the January meeting, there were no comments from the participants and therefore the ESG:
- (1) *approved* the draft minutes of the ESG meeting held on 16 January 2024.
- [6] Regarding the adoption of the minutes of the February meeting, and after having addressed comments from the Europe representative the ESG:
- (2) *approved* the draft minutes of the ESG meeting held on 6 February 2024.

4. IPPC Secretariat updates

4.1 SC Paper for ePhyto definition in the Glossary of phytosanitary terms (ISPM 5)

- [7] In its January meeting, the ESG discussed the definition of “ePhyto” and recommended the Technical Panel for the Glossary of phytosanitary terms to add “ePhyto” definition to the Glossary. As a follow-up action, the Secretariat requested the Standard Setting Unit (SSU) of the Secretariat to add this ESG recommendation to the agenda of the upcoming Standards Committee (SC) meeting to be held in early May. To this end, the Secretariat was invited to elaborate a concise one-page paper providing more details and information to support the request for developing a definition of the term “ePhyto” to the work programme of the Technical Panel for the Glossary (TPG). This document should outline the key aspects that underscore the relevance and significance of adding ePhyto into the Technical Panel work programme and importance for the IPPC community.
- [8] After discussion and considering comments made by the participants, the ESG:
- (3) *invited* the Secretariat to submit to the Standards Setting Unit (SSU) the Standards Committee (SC) paper on “ePhyto Steering Group (ESG) recommendation to add ePhyto definition in the Glossary of phytosanitary terms”.

4.2 Update on ePhyto Africa Workshop, FAO, Rome, 22-23/02/2024

- [9] The Secretariat gave an update on the ePhyto Africa Workshop held on 22-23 February 2024 in FAO Headquarters, Rome, Italy. Indeed, on January 8th, the Secretariat and the Global Alliance for Trade

Facilitation (GATF) met to discuss partnership on ePhyto implementation at country level with a focus on Africa and organized a workshop with key stakeholders to prepare an ePhyto implementation project in Africa.

- [10] This workshop organized by the IPPC Secretariat gathered 15 people from the Inter-African Phytosanitary Council of the African Union (AU-IAPSC), GATF, ePhyto industry Advisory group (IAG), IPPC Secretariat, Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF), TradeMark Africa (TMA) and United Nations International Computing Centre (UNICC).
- [11] Taking stock of ePhyto implementation in Africa, it appeared that 40 out of 54 African countries are not exchanging ePhytos and may require support in achieving connectivity to the Hub. In addition, among the 14 countries exchanging, a group of five countries makes more than 95% of ePhytos exchanged by African countries, which means that the nine remaining countries make very little use of the ePhyto Hub. Main challenges for ePhyto implementation in Africa go beyond technical connection to the Hub such as inadequate legal framework, inadequate infrastructures, inadequate technical capacity of staff, limited funds, low national interest for ePhyto, or insufficient autonomy of the administrative structure of the NPPO.
- [12] Based on a concept note prepared by the stakeholders, the participants agreed on the following project impact for ePhyto implementation in Africa: “Reduction of costs and timelines for safe trade of plants and plant products on a sustainable basis (70% of countries)”. Through brainstorming sessions, the participants drew up a first draft of the main outcomes of the project at global level and a breakdown of each organization’s roles (Who does what).
- [13] The next steps are to finalize the project logframe, prepare a letter of intent among stakeholders of the initiative and to get commitment from the countries to be supported for fund raising purposes.

4.3 Other updates

- [14] The Secretariat gave the following updates:
- In February, a new country registered to the IPPC ePhyto Hub, namely Eritrea.
 - Burkina Faso is still in test mode with GeNS and has not yet gone into production.

5. Regional updates

Europe

- [15] The Europe representative indicated that she had exchanged emails with Burkina Faso explaining they will move into production soon and they need the eSeal for consignments sent to the European Union.
- [16] She also informed that Slovenia should start sending ePhytos in production from 1st April.
- [17] Then the ESG:
- (4) *invited* the UNICC to write a message on the collaborative platform of the Hub when a country goes live so that everyone is informed and can activate exchange with them.

Near East

- [18] The Near East representative informed participants that as part of the ongoing work on the ePhyto-cost-benefit analysis being carried out by the FAO’s Investment Centre and Trade and Markets Division, the National Plant Protection Organization of Egypt has met 12 companies in the country so far. The aim is to understand the situation of the paper-based certification system, including the cost of issuing phytosanitary certificates and the challenges faced by exporters.

6. UNICC updates

6.1 Non-compliant ePhytos with the XML mapping: warning versus severe issues

- [19] During the adoption of the minutes of the February meeting and more specifically on the following sentence in paragraph 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.*”, the Europe representative wanted to know whether blocking rules for non-compliant ePhytos with the XML mapping are available or not. The UNICC representative then specified that the validation tool will block data to go through the Hub for those that are qualified as severe ones; this is the aim of this agenda item to discuss some warning issues and to decide whether they should be requalified as severe ones. He also reminded that countries need to use the validation tool and that the approach has always been to let the countries decide to use it or not.
- [20] The UNICC representative indicated that there are two issues; the first one is to improve the validation tool (purpose of this item) and the second is to encourage countries to use it before sending data to the Hub by means of an awareness campaign, an email, or a meeting. Regarding the improvement of the validation tool, he shared on the screen some checks of schema common errors that the ESG could consider elevating from warning to severe results (Appendix 3); a severe result will stop the delivery of the message if the country uses the XML validation tool before sending it.
- [21] For instance, the schema error “cvc-enumeration-valid” (No 1 in Appendix 3) means that fields in the XML linked to a list of codes are reported now as warnings; the UNICC representative suggested to elevate this schema error to severe so that it would avoid using text when standardized codes are available or using its own codes when standardized ones are available too, such as transport means. Then, the Chair reminded the reason why this was not implemented as severe before, with the example of means of conveyance. Indeed ISPM 12 provides the use of terms of conveyance and has them in quotes¹. For instance, while using “ocean vessel” is compliant with ISPM 12, there is no code for it and the transportation code says to use “maritime transport”. Therefore, there is a conflict between ISPM 12 and the transportation code.
- [22] For the three other schema errors (No 2, 3 & 4 in Appendix 3), the UNICC representative explained that there are not compliant with the UN/CEFACT² schema and suggested to elevate them from warning to severe (No 2 & 3) and remove from warnings when in relation to digital signature (No 4). Responding to a question from the Europe representative, the UNICC representative confirmed that if the exporting country uses the XML validation tool before sending data to the Hub, the severe issues will block their messages.
- [23] The Chair added that the XML mapping is in line with the ISPM 12 but, the UN/CEFACT schema reference certain codes that can be used while ISPM 12 does not use the same codes and, to have a perfect alignment of ISPM 12 with the UN/CEFACT schema would require a huge undertaking.
- [24] To conclude this discussion the Chair highlighted that there will always be tweaks to be made to improve the XML mapping, but this also depends on countries using the XML validation tool before sending data to Hub. It is also necessary to take into consideration the countries that have built their own systems; incorporating new codes that were never required on a paper certificate may be a huge challenge. The goal was to make the system flexible enough so that countries could participate without having to invest funds into redoing their own systems.

¹ ISPM 12 provides: “Terms such as “ocean vessel”, “boat”, “aircraft”, “road”, “truck”, “rail”, “mail” and “carried by hand” may be used.”

² UN/CEFACT: United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business

[25] In addition, and as regards selecting the country codes in the GeNS for instance, the UNICC representative pointed out that there is an issue with slow internet networks in some countries and indicated that the UNICC will improve this feature for the GeNS in those environments.

[26] At the end of the discussion, the ESG:

- (5) *decided* to maintain the check of schema error No 1 in Appendix 3 as a warning result, considering that having a perfect alignment of ISPM 12 with the UN/CEFACT schema would require a huge undertaking including revising ISPM 12 and countries investing funds in redoing their own IT system.
- (6) *invited* the UNICC to elevate from warning to severe results the checks of schema errors (No 2 & 3 in Appendix 3) and remove from warnings when in relation to digital signature (No 4 in Appendix 3).
- (7) *invited* the UNICC to provide improvements into the GeNS so that destination (entering, transit...) countries can be easily selected in slow internet environments.

7. Any other business

[27] There was no other business.

8. Date of the next meeting

[28] The next ESG meeting is scheduled on 9 April 2024 at 2.00 pm, Rome Time (UTC+2).

9. Close of the meeting

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

Action List

Action	Responsible	Deadline
1. Submit to the Standards Setting Unit the Standards Committee paper on “ePhyto Steering Group (ESG) recommendation to add ePhyto definition in the Glossary of phytosanitary terms”.	Secretariat	22 March 2024
2. Write a message on the collaborative platform of the Hub when a country goes live.	UNICC	Permanent
3. Elevate from warning to severe results the checks of schema errors (No 2 & 3 in Appendix 3) and remove from warnings when in relation to digital signature (No 4 in Appendix 3).	UNICC	2 nd Quarter 2024
4. Provide improvements into the GeNS so that destination (entering, transit...) countries can be easily selected in slow internet environments.	UNICC	3 rd Quarter 2024

Appendix 1**AGENDA OF THE EPHYTO STEERING GROUP MEETING****5 March 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	2024-03_ESG_01_Agenda	Chairperson
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 2024-02_ESG_Meeting_Minutes_Draft	IPPC Secretariat
4.	IPPC Secretariat updates		
4.1	SC Paper for ePhyto definition in the Glossary of phytosanitary terms (ISPM 5)	2024-03_ESG_02_SC_Paper_ePhyto	IPPC Secretariat
4.2	Update on ePhyto Africa Workshop, FAO, Rome, 22-23/02/2024		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
6.1	Non-compliant ePhytos with the XML mapping: warning <i>versus</i> severe issues		UNICC
7.	Any other business		Chairperson
8.	Date of the next meeting		IPPC Secretariat
9.	Close of the Meeting		Chairperson

Appendix 2**EPHYTO STEERING GROUP (ESG) MEETING PARTICIPANT LIST****5 March 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
Near East Member	Mr Islam ABOELELA Central Administration of Plant Quarantine The Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation Egypt	islam.gene@gmail.com
North America Member (ESG Chairperson)	Mr Christian B DELLIS United States Department of Agriculture, Animal, Plant Health Inspection Service, Plant Protection and Quarantine	christian.b.dellis@usda.gov
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

Appendix 3**Checks from the XML validation tool to elevate from warning to severe issues**

	Schema error	Scope	Reported issue	Action
1	cvc-enumeration-valid	All fields referring to standardized input in the uncefact schema (Document Type and Status, Transport Mode, etc.)	Use of text (ie By Air) or not standardized codes from ie IN and KE	Elevate from Warning to Severe
2	cvc-complex-type.2.4.a	Invalid content was found starting with element, while something else is expected in the schema	elements required by the schema but not for the Phytosanitary (ie Document Name, UnloadingBaseportSPSLocation, etc.)	Elevate from Warning to Severe
3	cvc-complex-type.2.4.b	The content of element xxx is not complete	as above missing elements in the XML as they are not needed as phytosanitary information	Elevate from Warning to Severe
4	cvc-complex-type.2.4.d	Invalid content was found starting with element XXX. No child element is expected at this point.	always reported with the embedded signature ds:Signature but it could happen for any unexpected child element	remove from warnings when in relation to ds:Signature