



COMMISSION ON PHYTOSANITARY MEASURES

NINETEENTH SESSION

EPHYTO IMPLEMENTATION UPDATE

AGENDA ITEM 12.1

(Prepared by the IPPC Secretariat)

1. Background

- [1] The harmonization of electronic data exchange is one of the eight (8) development agenda items (DAIs) included in the IPPC Strategic Framework 2020–2030. The work programme of this DAI, now in its delivery phase, aims at enabling countries' national plant protection organizations (NPPOs) to exchange ePhytos¹ in a safe, secure and efficient manner.
- [2] The IPPC ePhyto Solution is coordinated by the ePhyto Steering Group (ESG), which is comprised of representatives from the seven (7) FAO regions, the Commission on Phytosanitary Measures (CPM) Bureau (hereafter referred to as “the bureau”), and the United Nations International Computing Centre (UNICC) as partner providing the technical expertise. The purpose of the ESG is to provide coordination, guidance and advice on IPPC actions to develop and facilitate harmonized use of the IPPC ePhyto Solution, including Hub² and Generic ePhyto National System (GeNS). The ePhyto Industry Advisory Group (IAG) also advises the IPPC Secretariat (hereafter referred to as “the secretariat”) on the feasibility of the ePhyto Programme and its ability to facilitate efficient and effective trade flows. In addition, the term of the CPM Focus Group on Sustainable Funding of the IPPC ePhyto Solution has been extended until the Nineteenth Session of the Commission on Phytosanitary Measures (CPM-19) in 2025.
- [3] The IPPC ePhyto Solution management and supervision has been placed within the Implementation and Facilitation Unit (IFU) since September 2023. It should be noted that for supporting the ePhyto programme manager within the IFU, a call for an ePhyto programme assistant as an in-kind contribution was posted on 20 November 2024.
- [4] This paper provides an update on ePhyto activities implemented in 2024 in the framework of the ePhyto Strategic Implementation Plan 2024–2030, approved at CPM-18 in April 2024.³

2. Update on status of implementation

- [5] As of 30 November 2024, a total of 136 countries were registered to the IPPC ePhyto Hub including 53 through GeNS. In total, 92 were actively exchanging ePhytos. More than seven million (7 360 000) ePhytos have been successfully exchanged through the Hub by the active user countries (three million at the end of 2022; five million at the end of 2023). The system currently processes around twenty thousand (20 000) ePhytos per month. Those achievements are a successful example of collaboration between the secretariat, NPPOs, regional plant protection organizations, international organizations and industry to ensure the adoption and implementation of the IPPC ePhyto Solution.

¹ Electronic phytosanitary certificates.

² A centralized system to facilitate exchange of ePhytos between NPPOs.

³ CPM 2024/14 (Strategic Implementation Plan 2024–2030): <https://www.ippc.int/en/publications/93058/>

3. Governance

- [6] During recent CPM meetings, some contracting parties called for the creation of a governance structure to oversee the funding model and to provide strategic direction for the future of the IPPC ePhyto Solution. At its June 2024 meeting, the bureau considered three options: 1) Bureau/Financial Committee oversight (maintaining the status quo); 2) the ESG incorporates ePhyto Solution funding governance into its scope of activities; or 3) an alternative financial governance body or group is created. Emphasizing that the mandate of the CPM Focus Group on Sustainable Funding for the IPPC ePhyto Solution had been extended for another year until CPM-19 (2025), the bureau “agreed to maintain the status quo (option 1) and to reconsider establishing an alternative financial governance body or group (option 3) in a year’s time”.

4. Finance

- [7] Regarding the implementation of the ePhyto funding model approved as a pilot at CPM-18 (April 2024), an ePhyto Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) has been created. The secretariat subsequently sent an official communication to user countries on 26 November 2024 regarding expected (voluntary) contributions for 2025/2026.⁴ In addition, as a follow-up of CPM-18 (2024) recommendations, the CPM Focus Group on Sustainable Funding for the IPPC ePhyto Solution met twice to further explore alternative modifications and adjustments to the funding model. In this regard, a paper completed by the focus group is presented separately in this same **agenda item 12.1** in document CPM 2025/21.
- [8] As regards to FAO funding for the IPPC ePhyto Solution, the issue was raised by FAO member countries on several instances at the FAO Council (Hundred Seventy-fourth Session in December 2023; Hundred Seventy-fifth Session in June 2024) and joint meetings of the Programme Committee (PC) and Finance Committee (FC) (Hundred Thirty-seventh Session of the PC and Hundred Ninety-eighth Session of the FC in November 2023; and Hundred Thirty-eighth Session of the PC and Hundred Ninety-ninth Session of the FC in May 2024). Nevertheless, the IPPC contracting parties should continue to raise the need for funding at relevant FAO meetings, and specifically during the mid-term review of the FAO strategic framework.

5. Operations

- [9] The ESG continue to lead in developing the technical aspects and enhancements of the IPPC ePhyto Solution through monthly virtual meetings, with reports available on the International Phytosanitary Portal.⁵
- [10] To reflect the increased usage of the IPPC ePhyto Solution, the UNICC has requested to review the two (2) Service Delivery Agreements (SDAs) for the Hub and GeNS they had signed with FAO. At the time of writing, the review of the two SDAs with UNICC is ongoing, with the support of an IT expert provided by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as in-kind contribution to the secretariat.
- [11] Since May 2024, GeNS is also available in Russian and Spanish, in addition to Arabic, English and French.
- [12] Noting the growing role of technology in cross-border trade to improve efficiency and security, one of the developments being examined by the ESG is the possibility to forward a copy of ePhytos to third-party digital platforms. It is increasingly apparent that exporters requesting ePhytos may also want these certificates to be forwarded to blockchain-based digital platforms that manage and centralize a broader ecosystem of trade-related documents. Using the channel forwarding feature of the Hub (already used by some countries for forwarding ePhytos to customs single windows) the exporting system would be able to specify forwarding recipients while sending the ePhyto to the destination country. This would be entirely optional, based on the exporter’s request and the exporting country’s approval, and would begin as a pilot with GeNS, enabling countries using it to choose a third party as the recipient. The

⁴ CPM 2024/15_Rev1 (Funding of the IPPC ePhyto Solution): <https://www.ippc.int/en/publications/93059/>

⁵ ESG reports: <https://www.ippc.int/en/ephyto/ephyto-steering-group/>

benefits would be streamlined trade operations, as the business community is asking for enhanced visibility of the documents used in trade and their status. This feature could be an opportunity to receive funding from third-party entities for the IPPC ePhyto Solution. With regard to the financial implications, the UNICC indicated that the necessary developments on GeNS were estimated at USD 15 000. The bureau noted that phytosanitary certificates were a communication between NPPOs and not between NPPOs and other stakeholders or private-sector organizations, and concluded that forwarding ePhytos to a third party would require CPM approval.

- [13] As regards to legal implications of forwarding a copy of ePhytos to third-party digital platforms, the FAO Legal Office has provided the secretariat with the following information. Based on the assumptions that ephytos (i) are issued by the NPPOs of the exporting countries; (ii) do not contain any information belonging to FAO; and (iii) would be shared with third-party digital platforms only if the NPPOs of the exporting countries request such transfer, and with a view to mitigating any potential legal risks arising from such transfer, the FAO Legal Office suggests adding the wording in bold to the current disclaimer of the IPPC ePhyto Hub: “(...) *FAO shall not be held liable for any loss or damage arising from, or directly or indirectly connected to, the use of, reference to, or reliance to any content exchanged through the ePhyto Hub including any transfer to third parties.*”⁶ This legal advice relates to potential legal risks for FAO. As such, it is understood that before FAO is requested to forward any ePhyto to third parties, the NPPO requesting such transfer will make the relevant internal consultations and obtain any authorizations in accordance with its internal rules, procedures and risk management measures.

6. Country implementation

- [14] Broad implementation of the IPPC ePhyto Solution at the country level has been facilitated with the contributions of international organizations. The Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation has supported Colombia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Togo and Ukraine. The World Bank has supported Burkina Faso, Eswatini, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia. A Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF)-funded project “Strengthening phytosanitary compliance and public-private partnerships to boost seed trade in the Asia Pacific Region” (STDF/PG/755), has supported IPPC ePhyto Solution adoption in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam.
- [15] The IAG had set up three joint webinars with the secretariat, which provided the opportunity for more than 200 participants from NPPOs and the private sector to learn about the ePhyto Solution in Brazil, Canada and Egypt. The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Programme, supported by the Asian Development Bank, had also organized a webinar to support digitalization of the export/import in Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- [16] An IPPC ePhyto Africa Initiative is under development with stakeholders⁷ collaborating with the secretariat to support ePhyto implementation at the national level across Africa. Taking stock of ePhyto implementation in Africa (13 African countries are exchanging), the expected impact of the initiative is “Reduction of costs and timelines for safe trade of plants and plant products on a sustainable basis (70 percent of countries)”. A concept note, project framework and commitment from 32 African countries have been secured. The next steps include finalizing the communication strategy, establishing governance and seeking donor funding. The bureau had also agreed that oversight of the IPPC ePhyto Africa Initiative be placed under the Implementation and Capacity Development Committee (IC).

7. International cooperation

- [17] A new STDF-funded project on electronic veterinary certification in Latin America and the Caribbean, and implemented by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, has recently commenced and will draw on the success of the IPPC ePhyto Solution.⁸ The ePhyto programme manager

⁶ ePhyto Hub disclaimer: <https://www.ephytoexchange.org/AdminConsole/>

⁷ ePhyto Africa Initiative stakeholders: African Continental Free Trade Area, African Phytosanitary Council of the African Union, Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation, ePhyto IAG, IPPC Secretariat STDF, TradeMark Africa, and UNICC.

⁸ STDF/PG/856 project: <https://standardsfacility.org/PG-856>

will be the IPPC representative to the Advisory Committee of the STDF project on “Enhancing multilateral e-veterinary certification in Latin America and the Caribbean” (STDF/PG/856).

[18] In addition, a concept note is under preparation between the World Customs Organization and the IPPC on “Enabling digital collaboration between Customs and NPPOs through data standardization”.

8. Communication and advocacy

[19] Three (3) ePhyto success stories in Argentina, the Republic of Korea and Uganda have been published on the International Phytosanitary Portal.⁹

[20] The secretariat gave an overview of the IPPC ePhyto Solution at the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) Committee/Thematic Session on *Digital tools*, 25 June 2024, held at the World Trade Organization (WTO) Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.¹⁰ This was a great opportunity to communicate to SPS Committee members on the implementation of the IPPC ePhyto Solution, its impact on global trade, challenges encountered in ensuring country participation, and sustainable funding.

[21] The secretariat also gave a (virtual) overview of the IPPC ePhyto Solution, adjusted to the theme of the following workshops, respectively:

- **TradeMark Africa workshop** – 22–24 October 2024, Nairobi, Kenya: *Knowledge sharing and standardization of the national plant export and import certification system*. Gathering 25 participants from the NPPOs of Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia, the workshop established the way forward toward establishing a digital framework for implementing national plant export and import certification system;
- **TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia) virtual workshop** – 27 November 2024: *Customs issues along the TRACECA routes*. The workshop gathered 60 representatives from customs/transport authorities of 11 member countries of the intergovernmental commission TRACECA, World Customs Organization, United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, European Commission Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs Union, and the IPPC Secretariat. The workshop helped to promote the IPPC ePhyto Solution among customs officials and explore possible links between ePhyto and customs declarations; and
- **WTO-SPS Africa workshop** – 5 December 2024, Rabat, Morocco: *WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS)*. Gathering 40 participants from 22 French-speaking African countries (Ministries of Trade and Agriculture), this workshop was a great opportunity to present the IPPC ePhyto Solution and provide an update of the IPPC ePhyto Africa Initiative.

[22] The DAI brochure *Making trade safe by harmonizing electronic data exchange* was published in August 2024 on the FAO website and can be used for communication and resource mobilization.¹¹

[23] The study on ePhyto cost-benefit analysis and impact on global trade is currently being finalized by the FAO Investment Centre in partnership with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The preliminary results were presented at the Strategic Planning Group (SPG) October 2024 meeting.¹²

[24] The draft report concludes:

⁹ ePhyto success stories: [Argentina](#), [Republic of Korea](#) and [Uganda](#).

¹⁰ SPS Committee/Thematic Session on *Digital tools*: [programme](#) and [webcast and presentations](#).

¹¹ DAI 1 brochure: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3ed7e000-e2f3-4e28-966d-799619ef9cee/content>

¹² Presentations at the 2024 October SPG meeting: [Country-level cost-benefit analyses of the IPPC ePhyto Solution and Impact of the IPPC ePhyto Solution on global agrifood trade](#).

The global-level analysis confirms that ePhyto adoption has a positive impact on bilateral trade between countries that use the system, driven largely by reduced transaction costs. The country level analyses clearly demonstrate a positive return on investment. Countries with large export volumes and exporting to existing ePhyto users particularly stand to gain from the transition. The evidence further suggests that grouping ePhyto with other trade digitalization solutions could result in additional reduction in trade costs and supports a broader digitalization agenda.

[25] The final report of the study is due to be published by FAO at the time of CPM-19 (2025).

Recommendations

[26] The CPM is invited to:

- (1) *note* the successful implementation of the IPPC ePhyto Solution thus far;
- (2) *encourage* contracting parties that have not yet registered to the IPPC ePhyto Hub to do so;
- (3) *promote* the use of the IPPC ePhyto Solution;
- (4) *consider* whether the forwarding of ePhytos to third-party digital platforms should be incorporated into GeNS;
- (5) *encourage* contracting parties to continue to raise the need for ePhyto funding at relevant FAO meetings, including during the mid-term review of the FAO strategic framework; and
- (6) *encourage* all contracting parties to continue to provide support to the IPPC ePhyto Solution through the ePhyto MDTF.