



Strengthening phytosanitary border controls

The project aimed to improve the provision of inspection and diagnostic services by the Republic of Azerbaijan's State Phytosanitary Control Service (SPCS) and the State Customs Committee (SCC) in order to maintain the necessary level of phytosanitary protection for agricultural production and ecosystems in the country.

STDF/PG/316

Status

Completed

Start Date

01/09/2014

End Date

31/12/2018

Project Value (US\$)

\$3,250,000

STDF Contribution (US\$)

\$1,120,000

Beneficiaries

Azerbaijan

Implementing Entities

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Partners

State Customs Committee (SCC), Azerbaijan

State Phytosanitary Control Service (SPCS), Azerbaijan

Background

Agriculture plays an important role in Azerbaijan's economy and employs about 40% of the workforce. The main arable crops are wheat, vegetables, various fruits, grapes, cotton, tea and citrus. In the context of Azerbaijan's rapid modernisation and improvements in infrastructure, developing the agrarian sector and increasing plant and plant product exports is crucial to the country's economy.

To facilitate this, the establishment of the SPCS was decreed in 2005 in order to implement the Phytosanitary Law. The mandate of the SPCS was to ensure the country's phytosanitary safety in relation to import, manufacture, storage and processing of plants and plant products. However, the SPCS faced numerous challenges in its ability to implement its mandate effectively.

One key challenge was that as a result of the "Single Window" principle, the SPCS was no longer present at border points. In order to prevent the introduction and spread of harmful organisms in the country, SCC authorities needed to constantly inform the SPSC concerning non-compliant imports. The process of official Customs clearance of imported regulated articles was completed at destination after phytosanitary quarantine inspection and laboratory analysis. SCC authorities applied corresponding measures whenever indicated by the SPCS.

This process made it all the more important to address the lack of the SPCS's capacity to ensure the phytosanitary security of imported consignments of regulated articles, and particularly the detection and diagnosis of plant quarantine pests. The project therefore aimed to enhance the practical capacity for phytosanitary inspection and diagnostic services in Azerbaijan in accordance with IPPC international standards.

In 2018, the Government of Azerbaijan established the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency (AFSA), which was tasked with a broad mandate in the field, including the responsibility of providing phytosanitary services and protection within the country. AFSA has taken over the responsibility of phytosanitary-controlled quarantine facilities and plant quarantine materials to detect harmful organisms in a timely manner. The responsibility of inspections conducted at border points were also transferred to AFSA.

Results

Pest diagnostics service strengthened

A number of capacity-building activities for inspectors (136) and laboratory staff (17) on various aspects of pest diagnostics both in Azerbaijan and abroad were conducted. These include: three rounds (one for each year of project implementation) of training in basic inspection and pest diagnostics, on-the-job training for laboratory staff, and validation of laboratory methods.

The plan for the modernization of the Central Plant Quarantine Laboratory was prepared in 2016 and reviewed in August 2017. The laboratory was provided with modern equipment and consumables in 2016-2018. The reference collection within the Baku Regional Experimental Laboratory was enriched by the addition of samples of pests and harmful organisms.

Management of import regulatory system improved

Training sessions for inspectors, with an emphasis on the control of imported plants and plant products, were held. Training trips to Riga, Latvia, and Antalya, Turkey, helped inspectors from SPCS, AFSA and SCC to broaden their vision on respective topics based on international experience. Training courses on project management, and the improvement of presentation and negotiation skills of management staff in the phytosanitary field, allowed the management of the organizations to witness modern arrangements in place and to better understand and apply the best international practices and standards in practice in other countries. These also provided a valuable opportunity for management staff at the newly established AFSA to discuss with their counterparts the challenges faced in coordinating control functions in a variety of fields and to establish an effective system for a single inspection and certification authority.

The procurement of 60 inspector kits (inspector bags with required inspection tools) for SPCS and SCC provided the inspectors of both beneficiary organizations with additional tools to be used during training sessions and in their daily activities. In total, the project team developed 14 operational procedures in cooperation with representatives of SPCS and AFSA. Another achievement in the area of control of imported plants and plants products constitutes the design of Khachmaz inspection point in April 2017, which involved numerous consultations between FAO, the World Bank and the beneficiary organizations.

Pre-border inspection and export certification system improved

The capacities of national inspectors on export certification were strengthened through three rounds of training provided on import/export regulations. Participating inspectors underwent theoretical and practical training in export certification and had the opportunity to follow up on the experiences gained and to further improve their practices in the field, in coordination with their managers. The project team also prepared 14 operational procedures covering different areas of export certification. 80 staff members were trained in laboratory diagnostics and identification of quarantine pests, 73 staff members at border points were trained in inspection and 84 staff members were trained in export certification.

SPCS requested the establishment of an e-Certification system, which would further ease the work of SPCS and contribute to the improved monitoring of imported/exported plants and plant products. However, with the creation of AFSA and the transfer responsibilities, the plan was revised. In particular, the revision focused on the need to make use of the existing systems and to develop new modules for e-Certification and a registry of producers and exporters, in the current "One-window" state certification system.

Recommendations

Strengthening coordination and collaboration

The project contributed to a reduction of pest risks thanks to the collaborative efforts of the beneficiary organizations: based on the existing legislation and division of responsibilities, SPCS focused on carrying out export certification, monitoring pests, ensuring plant health inside the country and conducting pest diagnostics in its laboratory, while SCC inspected the import of plants and plant products at the borders, with support from SPCS. Later, with the creation of AFSA, all three organizations worked together to provide better phytosanitary services and maintain the phytosanitary situation in the country.

Transfer of acquired knowledge

The creation of AFSA represented an opportunity but also a risk that the capacity of those who had benefited from training and other support from the project might be lost during institutional reorganization. The implementing agency sent a strong message to the management body of AFSA with regard to the need to preserve the level of capacity achieved by the human resources available, and drew attention to the training/workshops/study tours organized under the project, sharing the lists of participants of all capacity-building activities for the Agency's consideration.

Adaptability to changing circumstances

During the transition of the phytosanitary responsibilities to AFSA, the management of AFSA asked the project to provide continuous online consultancy services on import-export regulations to support changes in the export certification system, documentation flow and responsibilities of officials at different levels. The online support provided assisted the creation of an effective structure that fulfils the obligations prescribed by the IPPC. A structure of phytosanitary functions with a vertical integration chain of command was established in order to successfully protect the territory from the introduction and spread of pests and to ensure export phytosanitary certification.

AFSA authorities expressed their gratitude for the support and recommendations provided during the establishment of the Agency, indicating that these had helped them to avoid any mistakes that may have challenged the credibility of the organization or have impeded a smooth transition of functions and staff. This process was highly valued with regard to maintaining international trade in a secure and efficient manner and to achieving the goal of increasing exports to key markets, such as the Russian Federation.