SPS ELECTRONIC CERTIFICATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE (ECAC)
SUMMARY REPORT OF THE FIRST VIRTUAL MEETING
18 MARCH 2020

1 INTRODUCTION

1.   The STDF Secretariat (Mr Simon Padilla) welcomed the participants, provided a brief introduction to the meeting and shared information about the ECAC: how it was created, what motivated its creation and its specific purpose and functions.

2.   The Secretariat made reference to the documents that were circulated in advance of the virtual meeting, including the ECAC Terms of Reference (TOR), the Annotated Agenda of the meeting and the List of Participants (Annex 1).

2 ELECTION OF A CHAIRPERSON

3.   The Secretariat referred to paragraph 16 of the ECAC TOR and welcomed expressions of interest from members for the position of Chair of the ECAC for the period 2020-2021.

4.   The World Bank Group (Mr Shane Sela) proposed the STDF Secretariat as the Chair of the ECAC, given its key role of convening and connecting a diverse range of stakeholders with different mandates and responsibilities. Some members supported this proposal.

5.   The STDF Secretariat responded that it would be able to assume this role, together with the Secretariat of the Committee, but that in this case, a small amendment would have to be made to the TOR, specifically paragraph 15.

6.   Members agreed that Mr Simon Padilla assume the role of Chairperson of the first meeting of the ECAC. A few members requested more time to reflect before approving the proposed governance structure for 2020-2021 (i.e. one institution being both the Secretariat and the Chair). Members agreed that this would be discussed again at the next meeting of the Committee.

3 OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES OF THE ECAC

7.   The Chairperson made reference to paragraphs 5 and 8 of the TOR: the specific purpose and functions of the ECAC. Members were invited to comment and discuss the functions and priorities of the Committee.

8.   The UNECE (Mr Markus Pikart) suggested that the ECAC should focus not only on SPS-related eCert activities and initiatives but on all agriculture or trade-related eCert initiatives, with the objective of sharing information about the different developments and facilitate linkages and synergies between these initiatives and SPS eCert.

9.   Members agreed with the proposal while some indicated that the TOR already cover this suggestion. In particular, they made reference to the last three functions listed in paragraph 8 of the TOR.

10.   The OIE (Ms Gillian Mylrea) requested a clarification regarding how points 4 and 6 of the TOR (i.e. "Develop projects" and "Identify resource needs […] and provide guidance and assistance in fundraising efforts") are aligned with STDF's process for application and funding of Projects and PPGs.

11.   The Chairperson clarified that the main function of the ECAC, by sharing information and experiences on eCert and promoting dialogue and discussions, is to encourage the development of new project ideas and the identification of possible funding sources for new initiatives. The role of the ECAC is not to develop project proposals, evaluate/approve projects or mobilize financial resources. The ECAC will not interfere in any way with the application and funding process of the STDF or any other existing funding mechanisms.

4 COMPOSITION OF THE COMMITTEE

12. The Chairperson made reference to paragraph 9 of the TOR: Composition of the Committee. He also referred to the discussions held in the STDF Working Group in October 2019, where some STDF members, in particular donors, expressed interest in participating in the ECAC discussions. The possible interest of the private sector was also mentioned. Members were invited to comment and discuss the composition of the Committee.

13. Members agreed that the composition of the Committee be maintained with the current members/organizations listed in the TOR, and that, as indicated in paragraph 10 of the TOR, other interested participants (including governments and private sector representatives) could be invited on an ad hoc basis to share information about their eCert latest developments.

14. The FAO (Ms Maria de la Puente) suggested to invite the European Commission (EC) to the next meeting of the ECAC to present the latest developments of the EU TRAde Control and Expert System (TRACES) in the area of eCert. Members agreed to invite the EC to the next meeting.

15. In response to a question from a member, the Chairperson clarified that according to the TOR the ECAC is composed of one representative from each organization listed in paragraph 9 of the TOR. That said, other staff from member organizations with expertise and knowledge on eCert and trade facilitation, could also participate in meetings.

5 SHARING OF EXPERIENCES RELATED TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPS E-CERT

16. Each member organization was given the opportunity to share experiences related to the implementation of eCert activities and initiatives.

17. The CODEX Secretariat (Mr Patrick Sekitoleko) referred to the work on eCert being undertaken by the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification (CCFICS). FAO, WHO, IPPC, OIE, WCO, WTO and the STDF have contributed to this work. At the CCFICS23 meeting held in Mexico City in 2017, the Committee agreed to start new work on the revision of the Codex Guidelines for design, production, issuance and use of generic official certificates (CXS 38-2001) to include guidelines on paperless use of electronic certificates. The purpose of the work is to develop a framework to assist competent authorities of CODEX members to develop and implement paperless eCert exchanges for food certificates. It is envisaged that the harmonized guidance would: (i) allow broader participation, promote consistency and simplify the development process for members developing eCert solutions; and (ii) help to evaluate the design and appropriate adjustment of the required certification information and possible solutions to facilitate paperless eCert. The guidance would not identify a particular eCert system but would function as a help tool offered to members to develop and modernize procedural aspects and to support the electronic exchange of certificates in a consistent manner, with a view to removing the requirements for paper certificates.

18. At the CCFICS24 meeting held in Australia in 2018, a number of aspects that could be included in the guidelines were discussed: paper-to-paperless transition; validation of certificate authenticity; data protection, retention and confidentiality; handling of electronic certificates in situations such as export/import rejection and/or redirection/re-consignment of goods in transit; and the handling of invalid certificates. The importance of incorporating into the discussion aspects related to the development and use of Single Window systems and its relationship with eCert was also recognized. The draft guidance was to be considered at the CCFICS25 meeting, scheduled to take place in Australia in 2020. Unfortunately, this meeting was cancelled due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

19. The IPPC Secretariat (Mr Craig Fedchock) provided information on the IPPC ePhyto Solution which is fully operational. The Solution includes: (i) the ePhyto Hub, established and managed by UNICC, to facilitate electronic exchange of certificates based upon a single communication protocol (to which countries with their own national eCert system can connect directly); and (ii) the ePhyto Generic National System (GeNS), i.e. a web-based system capable of producing, sending and receiving electronic phytosanitary certificates, developed by UNICC, for countries without their own national eCert system. At the present time, more than eighty countries are either using the Hub "live" (i.e., exchanging phytosanitary certificates in digital form as a normal part of doing business), or are in the process of getting ready to do so in 2020. Countries exchanging electronic certificates as a part of normal business include the United States, Argentina, South Africa, Ghana, Sri Lanka,

Samoa, Fiji and the European Commission (EC). At present, the Hub is handling approximately 11,000 certificates per month effortlessly, with the capacity to handle, in the current configuration, up to 100,000 certificates per day. The IPPC Secretariat and UNICC are working with the EC to facilitate the connection of the Hub to the EU TRACES system, as well as integrating the ePhyto Hub into national single windows systems. The Hub was built with resources provided by the STDF (https://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-504), and was initially created to facilitate the digital exchange of phytosanitary certificates. That said, any type of certificate - once coded in XML - can be exchanged through the Hub. For additional information, please visit: www.ephytoexchange.org.

20.   The OIE (Ms Diana Tellechea) shared information about the project implemented by the OIE (eVet), financed by the STDF (https://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-609), which aims to facilitate electronic veterinary certification based on single window system. The project is expected to be completed by June 2020 with the publication of the final report on the OIE and STDF websites. The project report is based on: (i) in-country surveys on the current status of electronic veterinary certification conducted in 2019 in selected OIE members; and (ii) research work on the state of play of eCert and single window systems in the SPS area. The report received a first round of comments from OIE members in a project Reference Group, and from members of the project Steering Committee, which includes six OIE members and relevant international organisations. The report will include recommendations to be considered by the OIE. Due to the current circumstances regarding the COVID-19 spread, the second meeting of the Steering Committee took place virtually on 11 March 2020.

21.   The CITES Secretariat (Ms Haruko Okusu) referred to CoP18 Decisions on electronic systems and information technology, which give CITES Parties guidance on how to implement eCITES, on the basis of the eCITES Implementation Framework. The eCITES implementation process has been slow, mainly due to the lack of a strong mandate and financial resources. An eCITES off-the-shelf software solution has been developed in collaboration with UNCTAD/ASYCUDA, and Sri Lanka has recently started implementing this solution. Interest in this tool from other Parties is expected. The CITES Secretariat is also discussing collaboration with the World Bank Group to support countries that are currently implementing the ePhyto Solution (e.g. Vanuatu). The CITES Secretariat is interested in exploring different options and solutions implemented by its Parties, identifying and disseminating lessons learned, and is keen to work with other partners. In late 2020 or early 2021, a joint workshop with the WCO is planned to discuss how current trading practices and the use of new technologies by Customs interact with CITES trade regulation process. A consultation on the CITES Electronic Permit Information Exchange (EPIX), organized by UNECE and UNESCAP, is planned to take place virtually in April 2020. CITES is interested in continuing the discussions on eCert projects and initiatives with interested STDF partners.

22.   The FAO (Mr Mischa Tripoli) provided information on recent work conducted by the FAO Trade and Markets Division on a technical network on innovation and new technologies in agriculture. The network provides a multi-stakeholder platform to exchange ideas and trends in the agricultural technology space, including blockchain and other digital technologies, including eCert.

23.   The UNECE (Mr Markus Pikart) shared information about current work conducted by UN/CEFACT to extend the set of electronic licenses, permits and certificates (LPC) for agricultural trade. An electronic quality certificate and an electronic Certificate of Origin (CoO) for agricultural exports has been developed. In addition, UN/CEFACT is developing an implementation guide for the cross-border exchange of electronic SPS certificates. This guide will be extended to cover electronic exchange of other agriculture-related certificates (i.e. eCITES, eQuality, eCoO). The guide will support countries using point-to-point and/or hub exchange architectures. A first draft of the guide will be available in April 2020. In the textile and leather supply chain, attention is paid to include information exchange of private (NGO) certificates, such as organic cotton, labour conditions, and policy claims of brands and factories.

24.   UNECE is working with CITES to support integration of UN/CEFACT eBusiness standards into eCITES. The CoP18 recommended to Parties to apply UNECE Recommendation 14, when using the electronic equivalent of physical signatures and seals, in CITES permits. Some Parties are now using this recommendation to digitally secure paper permits, thus reducing significantly opportunities for fraud. UNECE is providing support to the Ministry of Environment of Sri Lanka to implement the UNCTAD eCITES BaseSolution. Advisory services for simplification of Business Processes and implementation of a robust electronic control system and workflow were provided. In a second project phase, the system will be integrated into the electronic Customs clearance and control

process. UNECE is currently supporting the Ministry in developing an EPIX exchange module for electronic exchange of CITES permits using the UN/CEFACT eCert standard. To support member countries in Europe and Asia, including central Asian countries, in the implementation of electronic cross border exchange of information, UNECE and ESCAP, in collaboration with CITES, will organize a workshop on eCITES electronic information exchange (EPIX). The objective of the workshop will be to link the electronic permit exchange project of the UNECE region with projects to be launched in the ESCAP region. The workshop will take place virtually in April.

25.   The World Bank Group (Mr Shane Sela) referred to the collaboration with the IPPC Secretariat to support the implementation of the ePhyto Solution in developing countries, in particular in LDCs. The WBG has supported Zambia to assess its Business Processes and border management practices to define the changes and enhancements needed to implement eCert. The WBG is working with the CITES Secretariat to possibly include e-CITES as well. The WBG is particularly interested in assessing the impact of the ePhyto Solution and its replicability to other types of certificates that could be exchanged through the Hub. Additionally, the WBG emphasized the importance of ensuring that business preparation and process reengineering is essential to ensuring that electronic systems offer practical improvements and should be conducted prior to the implementation of any eCert system. It is also critical to ensure interoperability or connectivity with National Single Windows.

6 DISCUSSION

26.   During the discussion, CITES (Ms Haruko Okusu) made reference to its collaboration with the IPPC Secretariat in the framework of the ePhyto project. IPPC Secretariat (Mr Craig Fedchock) confirmed this statement.

27.   The World Bank Group (Mr Shane Sela) requested an update on statistical information related to electronic exchanges of certificates for the trade of plants and plant products. This information includes trade volumes, product names and categories. The IPPC Secretariat (Mr Craig Fedchock) indicated that the information transferred also includes sensitive information related to plant pests and disinfection treatments. In order to guarantee the confidentiality of the information exchanged, what constitutes a commitment from the IPPC Secretariat to its Contracting Parties, it is not possible to obtain any statistical information other than the number of phytosanitary certificates exchanged through the Hub. Publishing data on volumes exchanged would further facilitate a full understanding of the uptake of the system.

28.   The World Bank Group (Mr Shane Sela) referred to the possibility of using the Hub as a tool to exchange other electronic certificates. An increase in the number of certificates handled by the Hub will likely result in a reduction of the cost per transaction, and hence generate economies of scale for users/countries. Members agreed to continue discussing about this possibility in future meetings of the ECAC.

7 OTHER BUSINESS

29.   No other business was raised.

8 CONCLUSION AND CLOSURE

30.   The Chairperson noted that he would soon propose a date for the next meeting of the ECAC to be considered by its members.

31.   The Chairperson thanked the members of the ECAC for their active participation and closed the meeting.

ANNEX 1
LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Name	Organization	E-mail
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