

**SPS ELECTRONIC CERTIFICATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE (ECAC)  
SUMMARY REPORT OF THE SECOND VIRTUAL MEETING  
24 JUNE 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, including its specific purpose and functions.
2. The Secretariat indicated that following a recommendation made by the members of the ECAC, the European Commission (EC) was invited to present the latest developments of the EU TRADE Control and Expert System (TRACES) in the area of e-Cert.
3. The List of Participants is available in Annex 1.

## **2 KEYNOTE PRESENTATION**

4. The Secretariat welcomed Mr Philippe Loopuyt, Head of Unit Alerts, Traceability and Committees in the Directorate in charge of Crisis management in food, animals and plants, within the Directorate General Health and Food Safety of the European Commission (DG Santé).
5. Mr Loopuyt presented an overview of the current status of EU TRACES with a focus on e-Cert. The presentation focused on the main policy areas covered by TRACES, its current geographical coverage and use (by EU and non-EU members), the main characteristics of the system, including its legal basis and interoperability with other electronic systems, and its current status in terms of e-Cert and its use by third countries<sup>1</sup>.

## **3 DISCUSSION**

6. During the discussion, the IPPC Secretariat (Mr Craig Fedchock) thanked the presenter and highlighted the good collaboration between the IPPC Secretariat and the EC within the framework of the ePhyto project, which resulted in the incorporation of the ePhyto system in the EU TRACES platform.
7. The FAO (Ms María De La Puente) asked whether the Phytosanitary certificates currently received by the EU are directly submitted through the TRACES system or through the ePhyto system and received by TRACES through a web-service connection between both systems. Mr Loopuyt replied that since the systems are now compatible, both cases are enabled. Countries can produce ePhytos using the GeNS or their national systems and exchange these certificates through the ePhyto Hub or through TRACES directly. The EC is encouraging its trading partners to use the option that is most suitable to them. There are countries whose main or only trade partner is the EU and, therefore, TRACES is their preferred option, while others would prefer to use the ePhyto Hub, which allows for exchange with countries outside of the EU as well.
8. The FAO (Ms María De La Puente) commented that there are countries in East Africa (Uganda and Kenya) that are currently using both the ePhyto system and TRACES for the export of fishery products to the EU. Since the connection between the two systems has worked very well so far and considering that capacity has already been built in the countries to use both systems, it would be interesting that the future eVet be developed by building on the existing systems, capacities and experiences.
9. The OIE (Ms Tianna Brand), asked Mr Loopuyt how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected countries' implementation of e-Cert, including the use of the TRACES and ePhyto systems, and whether this change would remain in the long term. Mr Loopuyt responded that the COVID-19 crisis is presenting an opportunity for e-Cert to be used as a protective measure (ensuring physical

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<sup>1</sup> The presentation is available at:  
[https://www.standardsfacility.org/sites/default/files/ECAC\\_TRACES\\_Presentation\\_Jun-20.pdf](https://www.standardsfacility.org/sites/default/files/ECAC_TRACES_Presentation_Jun-20.pdf).

distancing and limiting personal contact or contact with objects). In addition, flight reductions and restrictions also constitute an extra incentive to move towards e-Cert, where information can be submitted electronically through the TRACES system. The COVID-19 pandemic has not represented a complete shift towards e-Cert; however, it has provided a good push towards this direction.

10. The World Bank Group (Mr Shane Sela) highlighted that the TRACES presentation was very useful and thanked the ECAC for arranging it. The WBG appreciated the flexibility that Mr Loopuyt and his team have shown in developing a system that permits direct exchanges, exchanges via the ePhyto Hub, as well as the functionality of exchanging data with the EU Customs Single Window Certificates exchange (CERTEX) system. The approach should be encouraged since it is very effective to facilitating trade by focusing on certificate data that is required by border agencies as opposed to focusing on the individual certificate exchange.

#### 4 DISCUSSION AND ELECTION OF A CHAIRPERSON

11. The Secretariat reminded members that at the previous meeting of the ECAC members had requested time to reflect on whether the STDF Secretariat could act as the Chair of the group.

12. The Secretariat recalled that the ECAC is an ad hoc practitioner group, established under the auspices of the STDF, to convene and connect stakeholders with an interest in SPS e-Cert to exchange experiences, identify opportunities for collaboration, promote synergies and disseminate good practices in SPS capacity. Similar to other informal groups created under the auspices of the STDF, the ECAC has no decision-making responsibility and the role of the Chair is mainly to convene the meetings, propose possible topics for discussion based on recommendations received from members, manage the meeting, and prepare and circulate summary reports.

13. Members agreed that Mr Simon Padilla assume the role of Chairperson of the ECAC.

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

14. Each member organization was given the opportunity to share experiences related to the implementation of e-Cert activities and initiatives.

15. The CODEX Secretariat (Mr Patrick Sekitoleko) indicated that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 25th Session of Codex Committee on Food Inspection and Export Certification Systems (CCFICS) was rescheduled from the end of April 2020 to 22-26 March 2021. In order to ensure work continuity, it was decided that the Electronic Working Group (EWG) on "paperless use of electronic certificates" would continue its work of drafting the guidance on electronic food safety certificates by considering the comments that had been submitted to CCFICS. New members are encouraged to participate in the EWG<sup>2</sup>.

16. The IPPC Secretariat (Mr Craig Fedchok) provided information on the latest developments of the IPPC ePhyto Solution (<https://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-504>), including: i) the integration of the EU TRACES with the ePhyto Hub; ii) how Argentina and Chile have moved to completely paperless exchange of phytosanitary certificates between national plant protection organizations, relying on the ePhyto solution; iii) the online modules for training NPPO officials on the use of the ePhyto GeNS and how several countries have already been employing this tool, i.e. Guatemala, Uganda and the Bahamas; iv) the ongoing work with the Industry Advisory Group (IAG) and the initial discussions with blockchain technology companies interested in piloting the use of a channel (relying on blockchain) to allow the private sector (exporters and importers) to have access to the data exchanged through the ePhyto Hub<sup>3</sup>.

17. 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>). The OIE recalled that the aim of the project was to better understand the state of play of veterinary certification and single window systems in selected member countries (both developed and developing). In addition, the project provided an overview of current e-Cert activities undertaken by other international

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<sup>2</sup> More information about EWG is available at: <http://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/committees/ewg/detail/en/c/1185805/>.

<sup>3</sup> For additional information on the ePhyto, please visit: [www.ephytoexchange.org](http://www.ephytoexchange.org).

organisations namely, IPPC, Codex, CITES and WCO, and aims to facilitate electronic veterinary certification based on single window systems.

18. The final project report was still in the design and translation phase and is expected to be available on the OIE website in July 2020. The report will provide useful and relevant information together with recommendations to the OIE, in its capacity as a standard setting organization, on possible future steps to assist its member countries in the area of e-Cert. Furthermore, the study of country systems will constitute a snapshot of the variability and state of play that will help the OIE to reflect on members' diversity and specific needs. The OIE expressed its appreciation to all members, experts and international organizations who contributed to the project. It is expected that the first discussions on the report, its recommendations and findings will take place within the OIE Executive Committee (an internal OIE management committee) over the summer in 2020 for feedback and agreement on proposed actions for the OIE Secretariat and the respective Specialist Commissions<sup>4</sup>.

19. The FAO (Ms María De La Puente) provided information on the work of the FAO Animal Health Incident Coordination Group (ICG), where e-Cert has been discussed at their weekly meetings. There seems to be an interest about e-Cert from countries, but none have yet requested FAO support or training on electronic veterinary certification. A questionnaire to understand the impact of COVID-19 in the veterinary services will be sent out by FAO soon, and will include questions on the difficulties faced to apply the import/export veterinary procedures, associated to movement restrictions. The new FAO Chief Veterinary Officer, has mentioned the creation of Virtual Learning Centres (VLC) in FAO regional offices that could serve as platforms to deliver virtual training, also on e-Cert.

20. The UNECE (Mr Markus Pikart) shared information about a consultative workshop, jointly organized by UNECE and UNESCAP, on CITES electronic Permit Information eXchange (EPIX) for Parties from the UNECE and ESCAP Region<sup>5</sup>. The event, originally planned as a face-to-face meeting in Bangkok, took place virtually on 8-9 April 2020, due to the COVID-19-related travel restrictions. The objective of the workshop was to support interested Management Authorities (MAs) and other national stakeholders to initiate the discussion on pilot-based and/or live electronic exchanges of CITES permits. Following the workshop, UNECE and UNESCAP continued the discussions with key stakeholders, which resulted in the establishment of the UNECE/ESCAP Task Force on electronic CITES Permit Exchange (EPIX Task Force). The Task Force is open for interested MAs who already have electronic CITES permit systems or envisage to implement such a system in the foreseeable future and are interested to proceed to EPIX exchanges. It is currently meeting virtually once a month to exchange information among each other. The next meeting will take place on 16 July 2020. In addition, UNECE organized in June 2020 two workshops for the implementation and exchange of UN/eQuality certificate<sup>6</sup>.

21. The World Bank Group (Mr Shane Sela, written submission) referred to its continuing support to Zambia, Fiji, and Vanuatu for the implementation of the ePhyto Solution, in collaboration with the IPPC Secretariat. In addition, the WBG is particularly interested in supporting a country in West Africa to implement the ePhyto Solution, to gain experience in working with a non-English speaking country and replicate this work in other countries in the region.

22. The World Trade Organization (Mr Rolando Alcalá) briefly presented COVID-19 transparency related work carried since the beginning of the pandemic. A glance at notified measures to the WTO under the SPS Agreement seemed to indicate that as an initial reaction to limit the spread of the virus, Members had adopted measures imposing import restrictions on live animals from affected areas. Subsequently, most notifications and communications from Members concerned measures aimed at facilitating trade by temporarily easing product certification requirements and moving towards more electronic/digital procedures, for example, regarding the acceptance of scanned copies instead of original documents.

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<sup>4</sup> For additional information on the eVet project and its report, please visit: <https://www.oie.int/standard-setting/overview/electronic-veterinary-certification/>

<sup>5</sup> More information about the workshop is available at: <https://www.unece.org/index.php?id=54116>.

<sup>6</sup> More information about these activities is available at: <http://www.unece.org/tradewelcome/un-centre-for-trade-facilitation-and-e-business-uncefact/meetings-and-events/uncefact/other-meetings/2020/equality-certificates-the-next-steps/doc.html>.

23. The WTO noted that there seemed to be an overall trend towards electronic certification, in line with the international ePhyto and eVet projects led by the IPPC and the OIE. While some Members explicitly indicated the temporary character of their measures during the pandemic, others had completed the transition to paperless certification in their trade of plants and plant products, and to a lesser extent, for animal products. Likewise, some Members had set up dedicated websites for the verification of scanned copies of the original certificates, while some still requested the submission of original certificates at a later stage. Several Members also included temporary flexibilities for foodstuffs, e.g. with respect to packaging and labelling. While food safety and animal and plant health remained a priority, the procedures set up by countries during the pandemic can contribute to reducing time and costs in the performance of SPS-related control, inspection and certification procedures and could set the basis for more permanent solutions.

24. This trend towards trade-facilitating electronic certification procedures was noted by WTO Members at the information-sharing session on COVID-19 held on 24 June, before the SPS Committee meetings<sup>7</sup>. More information is available from the WTO dedicated web page on COVID-19 and World Trade<sup>8</sup>, including a Secretariat paper Standards, Regulations and COVID-19, issued on 20 May 2020<sup>9</sup>.

## 6 DISCUSSION

25. During the discussion, the STDF Secretariat (Mr Melvin Spreij) reminded the group that many countries were moving towards e-Cert as a trade facilitation response to the COVID-19 crisis, in particular for plants and plant products by implementing the ePhyto Solution, and proposed to consider organizing a webinar on the ePhyto project, that has just ended in April 2020, to share the results of the project and discuss the next steps in sustaining its impact and momentum. The IPPC Secretariat (Mr Craig Fedchock) supported this proposal.

26. The World Bank Group (Mr Shane Sela) and the FAO (Mr Mischa Tripoli) were concerned about how to connect the ePhyto solution to blockchain technologies as well as what would be the criteria to select possible technology providers. The IPPC Secretariat (Mr Craig Fedchock) and the UNICC (Mr Venkatram Venkateswaran) clarified that they were in the inception phase of identifying and contacting blockchain providers, with the support of the ePhyto Industry Advisory Group (IAG), to start discussing about possible options. In relation to the technology application itself, the UNICC explained that blockchain could be applied to create a channel forwarding option so that the private sector would be able to access the certificate's information and clarified that the ePhyto solution itself would not have to be integrated into a blockchain platform.

## 7 OTHER BUSINESS

27. The Chairperson referred to the recently created ECAC webpage<sup>10</sup>, which contains information about the Committee, summary reports and presentations made at the meetings, as well as relevant information related to e-Cert initiatives, publications and events, and requested feedback and contributions from members that can be submitted at any time to the STDF Secretariat.

## 8 CONCLUSION AND CLOSURE

28. The Chairperson noted that he would soon propose a date for the next meeting of the ECAC to be considered by its members, thanked members for their active participation and closed the meeting.

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<sup>7</sup> More information is available at: [https://www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/news20\\_e/sps\\_24jun20\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news20_e/sps_24jun20_e.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Available at: [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/covid19\\_e/covid19\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/covid19_e.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Available at: [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/covid19\\_e/standards\\_report\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/standards_report_e.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <https://www.standardsfacility.org/sps-ecac>.

**ANNEX 1**  
**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

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