

## Quality information on SPS issues – a pre-requisite for capacity building

### Executive summary

*This proposal spells out a programme of work for the three standard-setting bodies recognised under the SPS Agreement to improve the sharing of information on standards and supporting scientific evaluations, through the medium of the International Portal on Food safety, Animal and Plant Health. This portal website ([www.ipfsaph.org](http://www.ipfsaph.org)), launched in May 2004, has already established itself as the single most comprehensive source of official information relevant to the SPS agreement. The initial objective in creating the portal was to prove that bringing together the different data sets of Codex, IPPC and OIE (as well as WTO) was technically feasible, and of interest to developing countries. This has been achieved. Some work is now needed to improve the underlying data sources to ensure that data is shared as efficiently as possible in the live version of the system. To illustrate the problem, producing the current version of the portal requires some manual cataloguing (description using keywords) of OIE, Codex and, to a lesser extent IPPC, materials by the portal team, with the need for regular updating of the relevant system files. What is now needed is some re-design of OIE, Codex and IPPC databases to accommodate common use of commodity codes and other keywords. In future, the description of content will then be done by the standard setting bodies themselves, allowing the portal - or other external data users - to access the standard setting bodies' information in a systematic manner. To complete this work, some programming is also needed on the portal itself, to load information automatically from these modified source sites.*

## Background

To quote a recent World Bank study on the costs of compliance with SPS standards, “relevant stakeholders face a major challenge in simply being aware of the rules and requirements pertinent to particular markets...” Such information is an essential pre-requisite for building capacity in developing countries both to address these issues locally, and to participate in standard setting activities.

The International Portal on Food Safety Animal and Plant Health ([www.ipfsaph.org](http://www.ipfsaph.org)), a collaboration between the main standard-setting bodies and the WTO, provides the only comprehensive means of accessing science-based information and data, decisions and guidelines of an intergovernmental nature, as well as an increasing body of national official information relating to food safety, animal or plant health.

The target users for the portal are those responsible for policies on food safety or agricultural health, national representatives in standard setting processes, trade (SPS) inquiry points, researchers and academics, production and trading interests in the private sector, and those involved in inspection and control activities within the countries..

These users are interested in SPS requirements in selected markets (the system already includes data from the US and EU), but also in the measures needed to ensure that domestic production and handling practices are appropriate, both for domestic protection, and to meet export standards.

From the portal, users can quickly:

- follow disease outbreaks (Avian Influenza) from a particular country
- identify which countries have issued SPS notifications relating to a given subject (BSE)
- check Codex pesticide (or veterinary drug) maximum residue limits for particular commodities
- obtain guidelines for food handling
- obtain scientific evaluations, specifications and MRLs relating to a particular product/pesticide (eg aldrin)
- obtain EU opinions regarding (eg campylobacter in poultry) or US Pest Risk Analyses on (eg Asian Longhorned beetle)
- review relevant laws in place in a given country from the FAOLex database

A number of developing countries have begun to make their data electronically available through to the portal, as a pilot activity.. Work is underway in Tunisia, Malaysia and the Ukraine – as well as Uganda and Turkey with STDF funding.

By working to make their own data on standards and regulations, risk analyses and scientific evaluations available to the portal, developing countries can both inform trading partners of the measures they have in place, and illustrate some of the actions which they are taking to address food safety and agricultural health issues. A comprehensive up-to-date national entry in the portal is the result of an on-going process of addressing SPS issues, and could be seen as an important indicator of good governance in this area.

## Portal use

The system was launched in May 2004, and currently contains links to 20,000 records (many with documents in 3 or 5 languages), drawn from 20 major data sets maintained by WTO, OIE, Codex and IPPC. Usage figures now indicate over 50,000 visitors a month, with a steadily growing number of visitors who return to the site, requesting over 300,000 pages per month (May 2005). These figures have more than doubled since the launch. The portal can now be browsed in English, French and Spanish.

Current visitor demographics indicate OECD countries as the main user base, although significant numbers (>30%) are from outside western Europe and North America. Publication in Spanish has led to a marked increase in interest from Latin America. Common search phrases have been analysed which indicate that the portal is used for both general queries (HACCP, humidity control, bse, mycotoxins, pesticide residues...) and very specific attempts to locate individual (known) texts (decreto real 1769/....)

User feedback has been positive. Developing country users like the ability to locate official information from a single access point (in cases with limited web connectivity), and the fact that the portal contains information across the traditional disciplines. They have stressed the need to include emerging private sector standards, references to ISO and regional standards. Others would also like to see more technical material such as references to relevant analytical methods published by professional or scientific bodies. The most significant outstanding item of user feedback is the repeated observation on the need for some form of “offline” version of the system.

In summary, the portal project to date has been attentive to developing country user requirements, and will use this feedback to further enhance the system in the coming months.

At the same time, the project team has actively sought working relationships with the SPS committee secretariat and technical assistance programme at WTO; with CBD (the Biosafety Clearing House); with OIE, Codex and IPPC. In promoting the portal, the team has worked with others to provide training materials and to avoid unnecessary duplication of databases (several new ones have been proposed for SPS-related information in the past year alone). As an example of collaboration, the portal is now an element in training courses of a number of technical assistance programmes, run by FAO and other agencies (eg JITAP), and this cooperative effort will continue thanks to the support from the STDF Secretariat for the inclusion of the portal, where relevant, in STDF-funded projects.

## FAO funding and plans from 2006 onwards

An estimated \$1,200,000, from a mix of FAO core funds and donor contributions, will have been used to build, test, launch and promote the portal up to the end of 2005 (the project started in early 2003).

FAO will continue to fund the “web master” for the portal plus a part-time programmer to ensure that the service continues to be available (around \$250,000 in 2006-07) with limited updating of data sets. However, this does not allow for consolidation of what has already been achieved, nor for developments to exploit the potential of the portal.

FAO is therefore seeking extra-budgetary support in a number of areas for the period 2006-07.

- (1) one-off improvements to the underlying portal infrastructure to improve data quality and accessibility (following the initial period of use);
- (2) monitoring and promotion of the portal; and
- (3) work with developing countries (or regions) to exploit the potential of the portal to demonstrate good local governance with regard to SPS issues, and facilitate trade.

At this stage STDF funding is sought only in association with the first of these work streams, to make one off changes to the system's infrastructure.

### **Work stream 1. Improvements to portal infrastructure**

#### **Proposed Activities**

The current version of the portal includes some information (standards, evaluations, animal health codes, disease reports, etc) from the three main SPS standard setting bodies which has been described manually by the portal team in order to fit it into the portal keyword structure (based on geography, commodity, information type, etc). This is estimated at about 25% of the total records in the system, but includes some of the most important categories – information published by the standard-setting bodies themselves. This situation was acceptable for the prototype phase but is not sustainable in the long term on the live version of the system.

Work is now needed in two areas:

#### *Activity 1: improved data management by source sites*

Work is needed “behind the scenes” at the source sites, to take a standard approach to describing their material, using a common format for metadata (title, description, subject and commodity keywords, last updated data, etc).

This goes beyond the normal work of the standard setting bodies in publishing their information – clearly each body already has an active web publishing programme. What is missing is in the area of sharing of information efficiently on a common basis between the bodies, and with other interested parties.

The benefits of this work will be seen most clearly through the portal, ensuring that it and its feeder systems are consistent, that data loading is as efficient as possible and that the information provided through the portal is of the highest quality (relevant and up-to-date).

However, improving the quality of the description of information on the three main standard-setting bodies' databases will also benefit their own users, allowing them to make their own data more easily retrievable, and permitting others to extract it, or link to it, more systematically.

*Activity 2: portal infrastructure changes*

Once the source sites have been modified, work is needed on the portal to ensure that the portal takes advantage of these modifications to load data automatically.

This work will also permit the loading of several important new data sets, particularly in the food safety area

The work on adopting standards for descriptions of material will also be used to improve the integration of information from newly included national databases from developing countries

Both activities fall within Theme 3 of the STDF business plan – “Information sharing on standards and technical assistance activities”.

**Tasks**

Under these two main activities, the priority areas for work are as follows:

- 1) Enhancing the principal feeder systems to improve access to their data by adopting common approaches for data description (metadata).
  - a) **OIE** – implement keywords on the OIE Infosan System, and in the xml version of the main animal health codes to improve harvesting of OIE information by the portal, and by other external sites wishing to include OIE content
  - b) **IPPC** – develop harvesting of data from official plant health-related external websites by the portal, and make this available to the IPP
  - c) **Codex** – incorporate food additives data and systems (JECFA and GSFA) within the portal; modify Codex systems for management of information on pesticides and veterinary drug evaluation and MRLs data so that they can be accessed by the portal and ensure the use of common data definitions throughout the codex website
- 2) Changes to the portal functionality:
  - a) **Data management improvements**: develop new data loading procedures based on feeder site changes;
  - b) **New data sets**: add new categories of data within the original scope (official; science-based; related to biosecurity, such as the new biosecurity capacity assessment tools; new ‘supporting materials’, etc).

Overall, this work will be evaluated based on reductions in resources required to maintain up-to-date links between the source sites and the portal. Further information can be supplied on current resource needs if required to establish a benchmark.

**Workstream 1:**

<b>Tasks, late 2005 – late 2006 (12 months)</b>	<b>Output</b>	<b>Delivered by</b>	<b>Estimated cost, 2005- 2006</b>
<i>Activity 1: feeder system improvements to support automatic updating of the portal site</i>			
a) OIE website – implement xml version of the animal health code, with appropriate keywords per section; implement modifications to the Infosan system to automate the gathering of weekly disease information	Improved description of material on source site	contracted services managed by system owner (OIE), with inputs from the International Portal team as required	\$80,000
b) IPPC website – develop import of data harvested from official websites, such as NAPPO's www.pestalert.org	New data sets in portal	0.5 programmer (30k) 0.2 content specialist (20k)	\$50,000
c) Codex website – implement full metadata on the production version of the Codex website (including JECFA and GSFA). Test a simple web service to ensure updates to Codex are reflected in the portal	Improved description of material on source site	0.5 programmer (30k) 1 content specialist (100k) 0.3 programme manager (50k)	\$180,000
<i>Activity 2: portal changes to improve usability</i>			
a) new data loading procedures b) new categories of content;	improved quality of data on portal; reduced resources required for central maintenance	0.5 programmer (30k) 0.8 content specialist (80k) 0.3 programme manager (50k)	\$160,000
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$470,000</b>