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Economic Commission for Europe

Committee on Trade

Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards

Sixty-seventh session

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Item 3 of the provisional agenda

Adoption of the Geneva Agreement

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Note by the secretariat

This document takes into account the comments made and agreed upon by the specialized sections on Seed Potatoes, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables, Meat as well as Dry and Dried Produce.

Proposals by the delegation of Switzerland

The delegation of Switzerland suggests that the “Agreement” be renamed to “Framework”. The purpose of these proposals is to make it clear that the text of the Framework should not be interpreted as being obligatory. The proposals clarify that the acceptance of the Framework is voluntary and that countries decide themselves on the level of their commitment in implementing UNECE standards.

To facilitate international trade, the proposals also stress the need for countries to inform the secretariat about their implementation of standards, and for the secretariat to make this information publicly available.

Geneva Agreement on Agricultural Quality Standards

This agreement replaces and supersedes the Geneva Protocol of 1985.

I. Introduction

1. The standard-setting activities of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) are carried out by the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards, operating in accordance with its terms of reference and working procedures. UNECE standards are developed to comply with the aims of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade and take into account the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures.
2. For the best results, when implementing UNECE and/or any international agricultural produce quality standard, an appropriate national legal framework and technical infrastructure is needed; and inspection services/providers should always follow internationally accepted inspection procedures.

II. Agricultural quality standards

3. For agricultural products to move in trade, commercial agricultural quality standards are needed as a common trading language. These standards are an important component of a broader system of quality assurance and control, along with food safety and phytosanitary aspects, supporting international trade.
4. UNECE standards set minimum quality levels that provide a common language to facilitate fair trade, prevent technical barriers to trade and increase transparency in the markets. They promote sustainable marketing of quality agricultural produce, keep low-quality agricultural products out of the market and protect consumer interests.
5. The standards are intended for adaptation and/or adoption in national standard-setting. The use of their common terminology and harmonized quality requirements helps buyers and sellers to understand the quality of the products being marketed, and also minimizes the risk of technical barriers to trade.
6. UNECE develops and updates standards, and promotes them worldwide. It helps countries translate the standards into practice and prepares explanatory material to make them more easily understood. It cooperates with other international bodies including the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU) and WTO.
7. It develops and revises its standards in an inclusive, transparent process. All member countries of the United Nations or of its specialized agencies may participate on an equal footing and all with the same rights. Decisions are taken on a consensual basis.
8. Countries initiate the development of new standards or the revision of existing standards to reflect changing conditions of production, marketing, inspection and regulation. After the standards are adopted - and for their effective practical application by producers, traders and inspection services - each specialized section of the Working Party sets the publication of new versions of the standards within an agreed time frame to ensure stability in the use of the standards.
9. Any country wishing to participate in the UNECE work on agricultural quality standards should notify the UNECE secretariat indicating its designated national authority,

i.e. the national focal point for this work and the institution responsible for commercial quality control. Non-governmental organizations accredited to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations may take part in the discussions. National delegations may include representatives of the private sector with the agreement of the national designated authority.

III. Framework to secure adoption and application of standards

10. The UNECE standards, explanatory material and other related documents have the status of recommendations, and the Geneva Agreement acts as a framework to secure their adoption and practical application. It is considered that Governments recognize the present Agreement if they~~By accepting the present Agreement, Governments undertake to:~~

- participate in the international standard-setting work
- do not prevent the use of UNECE standards in commercial trade
- put into effect, as nationally relevant, ensure that~~the standards and other recommendations are put into effect~~by one or several of the following measures:
 - making reference to or reproducing UNECE standards in their national legislation
 - using UNECE standards when they are adopted or adapted as a basis for national standards; at the import stage standards may not be stricter than the relevant UNECE standards; at the export stage standards may set stricter quality requirements
 - ~~encouraging the use of UNECE standards when appropriate for international and/or domestic trade~~
 - not preventing the use of UNECE standards in commercial trade.

11. Countries that have accepted this Agreement through participation in and support of the UNECE standardization work

- Agree to the UNECE standard-setting process, as set out in the terms of reference and working procedures of the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards
- Agree to take UNECE standards into account when developing national standards
- Agree; to implement them, and to inform the UNECE secretariat, in their area of competence, of the status of national implementation of standards, as well as of changes, additions or deletionsmissions to the standards according to the procedures defined by the secretariatthat they intend to introduce when implementing them
- Agree to accept that informthe UNECE secretariat periodically publish a report on ~~of~~ the status of implementation of standards, as well as of changes, additions and deletions made to them in their area of competence.

IV. International cooperation

12. UNECE aims at coordinating its activities with other international organizations active in the area of agricultural quality standards.