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**Council for Trade in Goods
Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures**

SPS COVID-19 RELATED ACTIONS

REPORT TO THE COUNCIL FOR TRADE IN GOODS BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE SPS COMMITTEE

The following report is being submitted by the Chairperson of the Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Committee), Mr Tang-Kai Wang, under his own responsibility, at the request of the Chairperson of the Council for Trade in Goods (CTG).¹ The report was prepared with the assistance of the Secretariat.

1 COMPILATION OF INFORMATION FOR THE CTG REPORT ON SPS COVID-19 RELATED ACTIONS

1.1 Dedicated COVID-19 information sessions

1.1. In June 2020, the SPS Committee held an informal [information-sharing session on COVID-19](#). The programme was circulated in document [G/SPS/GEN/1795](#). The WTO Secretariat presented an overview of documents submitted by Members in relation to COVID-19. The STDF presented on its COVID-19 response, underscoring the importance of building food safety and animal and plant health capacity to enable the public and private sectors, especially in developing countries, to respond to crises. WTO Members, the three relevant international standard setting bodies (Codex Alimentarius, the World Organisation for Animal Health [WOAH] and the International Plant Protection Convention [IPPC]), WHO and other observers provided information on their activities undertaken since the beginning of the pandemic. WTO members stressed the importance of providing a coordinated response to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring that trade in agricultural and food products was not unduly disrupted. The standard-setting bodies stressed the importance of enhanced global networks in effectively tackling emergency situations and warned against the temptation of relying solely on national measures, to avoid further trade disruptions. WHO explained the role of the International Health Regulations in facilitating information exchange on public health responses, ensuring that the responses are commensurate to the risk and avoiding unnecessary interference with international trade and transportation. The WHO also referred to COVID-19 related guidance, produced with FAO, for food businesses and food safety control systems. The report of the session is contained in document [G/SPS/R/98](#) and a news item on the discussions held in the session is available [here](#).

1.2 Committee work

1.2. As a result of the pandemic-related lockdown, the SPS Committee meeting scheduled for 19-20 March 2020 was cancelled.²

1.3. The 25-26 June 2020 SPS Committee meeting was held through a combination of a virtual meeting with written procedure. SPS eAgenda was used for the first time, allowing for the exchange of written statements. Because of time constraints on virtual meetings, only a limited number of

¹ See document [JOB/CTG/18](#).

² See WTO document [JOB/SPS/5/Rev.1/Corr.1](#).

agenda items were addressed orally.³ At a consultation held after the meeting, delegates expressed a preference for oral meetings. The Committee therefore decided that in the future, the ability to exchange written statements through eAgenda would only be used to complement oral exchanges in SPS Committee meetings, but not to replace them.

1.4. Since November 2020, the SPS Committee meetings took place in hybrid mode, with some delegates attending in person and others joining via a virtual platform. Until June 2022, the agenda of informal and formal meetings included a standing item on COVID-19 and SPS issues, where the Secretariat, Members, the international standard-setting bodies and other Observer Organizations regularly reported on activities related to the pandemic. A summary of discussions held in the SPS Committee has been included in the [corresponding summary reports](#) of the meetings. In June 2022, the Chairperson noted that there had not been any interventions under this agenda item in recent Committee meetings and the Committee agreed not to include this agenda item for the next SPS Committee meeting.⁴

1.5. The Committee held a [Thematic Session on the Use of Remote \(Virtual\) Audit and Verification in Regulatory Frameworks](#) in June 2022.⁵ The purpose of the thematic session was to provide an opportunity to share experiences on the use of remote assessment methods, discuss how such approaches may assist Members with their obligations under Annex C of the SPS Agreement, and take a closer look at the relevance and scope for future use. It also sought to provide insight on ongoing initiatives including guidance being developed by Codex under its Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS), and allow Members and industry representatives to discuss the benefits and challenges of remote audit, drawing from their experiences. Members' presentations shed light on the forms of remote assessment, including those used during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the link with regulatory frameworks.

1.3 Transparency

1.6. The dedicated WTO [COVID-19 and world trade](#) web page contains all COVID-19 related news as well as information on COVID-19 related WTO work, reports and events. SPS notifications and documents related to COVID-19 submitted since February 2020 can also be found there.

1.7. As of 1 November 2022, 31 Members have submitted a total of 127 SPS COVID-19 related documents, including notifications of new or changed SPS regulations and other communications, representing 26% of all COVID-19-related documents received by the WTO.⁶ Initially, the notified measures mainly related to restrictions on imports of animals or animal products and/or transit from affected areas and increased certification requirements. Many of these restrictions were subsequently lifted. While a few new restrictions were imposed at a later stage, most notifications and communications submitted since the beginning of April 2020 relate to measures taken to facilitate trade, representing about 2/3 of all notified measures. For example, some Members have allowed temporary flexibility for control authorities to use electronic versions or copies of veterinary and/or phytosanitary certificates, since the COVID-19 situation has made the transmission of original paper certificates problematic. Similarly, some Members authorized virtual verifications of production conditions and of their trading partners' facilities. In some cases, the implementation period of the TF measures was subsequently extended. The last COVID-19-related SPS notification was received on 8 July 2021.

1.8. Additionally, 40 Members submitted a request for the suspension of the processes and entry into force of reductions of maximum residue limits (MRLs) for plant protection products in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ In addition to the extension of the timelines, co-sponsors requested the European Union, as well as other Members who were in the process of reviewing or modifying MRLs with a view to establishing more restrictive levels, to base their MRLs on international standards, guidelines and recommendations. This proposal was discussed several times in the Committee

³ See WTO document [JOB/SPS/8](#) and [JOB/SPS/8/Add.1](#). The report of the meeting is available in [G/SPS/R/99](#).

⁴ See paragraph 6.20 in WTO document [G/SPS/R/107](#).

⁵ The dedicated webpage for the Thematic Session can be accessed here: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/spse/e/thematic_session_21jun22_e.htm.

⁶ WTO database, [WTO members' notifications on COVID-19](#). COVID-19-related SPS notifications can also be tracked through [ePing](#) search and alert functions.

⁷ See WTO document [G/SPS/GEN/1778/Rev.5](#).

between June 2020 and March 2021. In response, the European Union circulated document [G/SPS/GEN/1814 and revisions](#), and reported on actions taken to facilitate the continuation of trade, which included launching a number of financial and technical assistance packages to support its partner countries.

1.9. Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the two reports that the WTO Secretariat produces twice a year in the context of the [trade monitoring exercise](#) have included information on COVID-19-related SPS measures.

1.4 Specific trade concerns

1.10. COVID-19-related measures have also been raised as specific trade concerns (STCs) and discussed as part of the regular work of the SPS Committee. Members have discussed two STCs in the SPS Committee that refer to COVID-19. These relate to trade restrictions or import procedures put in place by importing Members in relation to COVID-19, where other Members are of the view that trade is restricted more than necessary for health-protection purposes, and/or the measures may be creating unjustified barriers to international trade. Specifically, the following STCs have been discussed by Members:

- [STC 487](#): China's actions related to COVID-19 that affect trade in food and agricultural products, raised for the first time in November 2020 by several Members, and subsequently raised 6 more times.
- [STC 488](#): The Philippines' ban on poultry imports due to COVID-19, only raised once in November 2020. The temporary bans imposed by the Philippines on importation of poultry meat originating from Brazil ([G/SPS/N/PHL/467](#)) were subsequently lifted, although the STC has not yet been reported as resolved.

1.5 Information notes

1.11. An information note titled "[Standards, regulations and COVID-19 – What actions taken by WTO members](#)" was first published on 11 May 2020 and subsequently revised on 4 December 2020. The note describes standards and regulations notified by Members under the TBT and SPS agreements in 2020 in response to the pandemic, most of which affect trade in personal protective equipment (PPE), food, medical equipment, plant products and live animals.

1.12. On 11 November 2020, the note "[Future resilience to diseases of animal origin: The role of trade](#)" was published, summarizing current issues, status of legal frameworks, and planned future actions to avoid the spread of zoonoses through trade. The information note included a section on COVID-19.
