

Facts or Friction: The Evolving Role of Science in Phytosanitary Issues¹

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Abstract

With the expansion of global trade, problems with invasive alien pests have also grown. In order to reduce the international movement of plant pests and protect valuable plant resources, national plant protection regulations and international standards continue to be developed. Science is critical to the development of effective national and international plant protection regulations aimed at reducing the spread of plant pests. There is an increasing recognition that such regulations be “science-based” as identified in the World Trade Organization Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (WTO-SPS) agreement. This need is clearly recognized by the Commission on Phytosanitary Measures (CPM), the governing body of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). The CPM has established expert working groups and technical panels with scientific capacity to support the development of international phytosanitary standards. Science is valuable to plant health regulators as it is a useful tool to identify and address plant pest problems, and is often used in “technical justification” required in domestic and international trade disputes.

Within the structure of the IPPC, a group known as the Standards Committee initiates new international plant protection standards, relying on expert working groups and technical panels to provide accurate scientific information as a basis for their development. Members of these groups are recognized global experts in science and plant health regulatory issues and work from within their national institutions (universities, government agencies, etc) for the benefit of the IPPC. Another group, the International Forestry Quarantine Research Group (IFQRG) is an independent body formed in 2004 focusing on global forestry quarantine issues. This group of scientific specialists and plant health regulators produces issue-specific analyses and undertakes collaborative research in cooperation with the IPPC.

Although much of this work is carried out in a spirit of cooperation, trade considerations and an increasing global awareness regarding phytosanitary issues can lead to disagreements and scientific information is often requested to help resolve disputes. However, there is often a shortage of published information and disputing countries may have different interpretations of experimental results. In recognition of these challenges, there are global efforts to increase international research collaborations to address existing and anticipated phytosanitary problems, where possible standardizing research protocols with cooperative analyses of results. It is hoped that this will lead to greater clarification of pest problems, improved regulations to minimize pest movement, and a reduction in pest-related disputes.

Key words: Regulatory, phytosanitary, International Plant Protection Convention.

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