

INTERNATIONAL

New UN Resolutions Sharpen Focus on Plant Health, Food Safety and Pulses

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has applauded a 20 December decision by the UN to create two new international days and one entire year devoted to central issues in global food security and nutrition.

The UN General Assembly approved three new resolutions creating three awareness-raising initiatives, focused on plant health, food safety and pulses.

The FAO and the International Plant Protection Convention Secretariat, based at the FAO, welcomed the decision to proclaim 2020 as the *International Year of Plant Health*. With up to 40 percent of global food crops lost annually due to plant pests, the importance of fostering healthy plants is critical for public opinion and policy makers. In economic terms alone, plant diseases cost the global economy around \$220 billion annually and invasive insects around \$70 billion.

“The International Year of Plant Health is a key initiative to highlight the importance of plant health to enhance food security, protect the environment and biodiversity, and boost economic development,” said FAO Deputy Director-General, Maria Helena Semedo.

Meanwhile, from now on, 10 February will mark *World Pulses Day*, keeping alive the positive momentum surrounding these healthy, nutritious, protein-rich, nitrogen-fixing legumes after FAO’s successful 2016 International Year of Pulses Campaign. Growing pulses contributes to sustainable crop production.

Following that, 7 June will be *World Food Safety Day*, paying tribute to an increasingly important issue in today’s highly-interconnected food systems. The FAO noted “with satisfaction” that the UN resolution expressly recognized that “there is no food security without food safety”.

Plant Health

The UN General Assembly invited the FAO, with the IPPC Secretariat, to serve as the lead agency to spearhead activities related to International Year of Plant Health, and called on governments, civil society, and the private sector to engage at global, regional and national levels. An *International Plant Health Conference* will be among thousands of plant health events to be held around the world during the course of 2020.

Finland first proposed the year to the governing body of the International Plant Protection Convention in 2015. In July 2017, the FAO Conference adopted a resolution in support of the proposal.

“Pests and diseases don’t carry passports or observe immigration requirements and, therefore, the prevention of the spread of such organisms is very much an international undertaking that requires the collaboration of all countries. This is why Finland proposed to proclaim 2020 the International Year of Plant Health,” said Jari Leppä, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland.

“Despite the increasing impact of plant pests and diseases, resources are scarce to address the problem,” said Semedo. “We hope this new International Year of Plant Health will trigger greater global collaboration to support plant health policies at all levels which will contribute significantly to the Sustainable Development Agenda.”

Food Safety

Unsafe food causes more than 200 diseases worldwide, including some forms of cancer, highlighting how food security and the battle to eradicate hunger stretches well beyond production and distribution issues.

Foodborne diseases impact an estimated 600 million people every year and place a serious burden on human health, in particular that of young children and people living in low-income regions of the world. Moreover, safe foods contribute positively to trade, employment and poverty alleviation.

The UN resolution urges the FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) to “facilitate the observance” of World Food Safety Day – first promoted by Costa Rica – and to help meet the urgent need to raise awareness of the global importance to improve food safety.

The resolution also acknowledges the key roles played in the food safety arena by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) – jointly run by FAO and the WHO – and by the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures.

The FAO said it works closely with member states to enhance capacity to comply with international requirements and contribute to shaping the rules governing food safety. FAO will co-organize two major international conferences on food safety in 2019, one in Ethiopia in February, and one in Switzerland in April.

Pulses

The special annual day for pulses, which was promoted by Burkina Faso, builds on the successful International Year of Pulses that FAO led in 2016.

Pulse crops such as lentils, beans, peas and chickpeas have multiple virtues, being strong sources of plant-based proteins and amino acids for human diets and offering invaluable ecosystem services, thanks to their ability – when grown as cover crops or explicitly for food – to fix atmospheric nitrogen in soils. On average, cereals grown after pulses yield 1.5 tonnes more per hectare than those not preceded by pulses, which is equal to the effect of 100 kilograms of nitrogen fertilizer.

The General Assembly also emphasized that pulse crops can play a powerful role in improving gender equity, noting they are frequently cultivated by women and also noting their high iron content that contributes significantly to the health of women of reproductive age. Pulses are also important sources of B-vitamins, magnesium, potassium, phosphorous and zinc, and offer a higher-fiber, lower-calorie dietary option than cereals.

Upcoming Conference Will Focus on the Future of Food Safety to Boost International Commitments

Health and agriculture officials, food safety authorities, scientific experts, representatives of consumers and food producers associations as well as other organizations including the private sector will convene in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and Geneva, Switzerland early 2019 to identify key actions and strategies to address current and future challenges to food safety.

The Future of Food Safety – Transforming knowledge into action for people, economies and the environment is the overall topic of the events, co-organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the African Union.

The Addis Ababa meeting will centre on:

- The burden of foodborne diseases and the benefits of investing in safe food
- Safe and sustainable food systems in an era of accelerated climate change
- Science, innovation and digital transformation at the service of food safety
- Empowering consumers to make healthy choices and support sustainable food systems.

The Geneva Forum will be held on the WTO premises and address the trade-related aspects and challenges of food safety.

Together the two events offer a unique opportunity to strengthen political engagement and commitments and scale up food safety in the 2030 Agenda.

The Codex Secretariat is part of the team preparing the two events and colleagues involved in Codex activities at the national level, such as Codex Contact Points, may help to facilitate the appropriate nomination of participants and support the follow up on actions to be taken after the Conference.

With an estimated 600 million cases of foodborne illnesses and 420 000 deaths caused annually, unsafe food is a threat to human health and economies everywhere, disproportionately affecting those already vulnerable such as small chil-

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