

Phytosanitary control is a key part of the system for achieving a high health status of plants

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Conversation of Vesela Shishkova with Zlatan Yordanov, Head of the “Plant Protection” Department at the Regional Food Safety Directorate – Varna

Mr. Yordanov, Varna is part of the external Black Sea border of the European Union. This position assigns it a special role and responsibilities for protecting plants and plant production from harmful organisms. What are the organisation, structure, format and priorities of the operational phytosanitary control in this highly sensitive territory?

Before answering your question, it is correct to note that the activities of the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency in the field of phytosanitary control (PSC), plant health and phytosanitary measures at international level are regulated by the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), and at national level – by the Plant Protection Act (PPA) and Ordinance No. 8 on PSC, which is fully harmonised with Directive 2000/29/EC. It is appropriate here to recall that PSC in Bulgaria is methodically guided by the Central Plant Quarantine Laboratory (CPQL).

The priorities of operational phytosanitary control, a structural part of the “Plant Protection” Department of RFSD-Varna, are in several directions. The first of these is control on the import of plants and plant products from third countries into our country and into the EU. The flow of plants and plant commodities is localised at the border inspection posts – Varna-East Port, Lesport, Varna-West, the ferry terminal and the Inland Customs Clearance Point. Here the phytosanitary inspection is carried out – documentary, identification and health checks of plants and plant commodities imported from third countries. After this comprehensive control they move freely throughout the entire territory of the EU. In this case I must make one clarification. Since 2012 PSC at the border has been carried out by the team of the Border Control Department within the Border Control Directorate of the BFSA.

The next priority of PSC is the production of plants and plant products, which includes detailed surveillance on the territory of the region with regard to quarantine pests. In this way, a high health status of domestic production and safe export is ensured, in accordance with the phytosanitary requirements of the importing country. This is the most reliable tool for eliminating the risk of occurrence and spread of quarantine pests in other EU countries. The main method for assessing the phytosanitary status is visual inspection of plants, which, in the event of even the slightest suspicion, is obligatorily accompanied by sampling for laboratory analyses.

The free movement of goods within the EU brings, in addition to greater responsibility, a certain risk. From a phytosanitary point of view this is the risk of spreading quarantine pests on the territory of our country through goods from other Member States of the Community. This necessitates subsequent control – regular inspections of markets, wholesale markets, trading floors and distribution centres.

A large number of EU legislative acts, in particular the acts concerning the control of specific harmful organisms, require Member States to carry out regular surveys of their territories. The data related to the surveys are analysed and reported through general surveillance and specific surveys. General surveillance refers to the use of any data on the status of pests, and identification protocols adopted by EPPO. Specific surveys require specific actions, specifically aimed at inspecting hosts or commodities in accordance with the survey plan drawn up by CPQL.

For this purpose, phytosanitary monitoring programmes are organised for the various plant species for the timely detection and prevention of regulated pests on the territory of the country and the EU. The regional plans are drawn up on the basis of the annual sampling plan of CPQL. It specifies the minimum number of samples to be taken, and, when necessary, the number of samples may be increased. Samples are taken mainly on the basis of existing suspicion and risk analysis. Nevertheless, even if no symptoms are detected, the taking of asymptomatic samples is not excluded. The phytosanitary monitoring programmes include potatoes, fruit species, vineyards, greenhouse vegetables, strawberries and soft fruit crops, forest and ornamental species. Every year these programmes are updated, supplemented and specified.

Through the phytosanitary monitoring programmes and additional surveillance pursuant to decisions of the EC and the calendar plan for individual pests, the phytosanitary situation in Bulgaria and the phytosanitary status of regulated species subject to compulsory official control are demonstrated and reported!

In which phytosanitary monitoring programmes does RFSD-Varna hold leading positions?

In our diagnostic regional laboratory, nematological and virological expertise is carried out on samples under the national monitoring programmes for vineyards and ornamental species on the territory of Northern Bulgaria.

Our laboratory equipment enables us to carry out all types of analyses – entomological, nematological, herbological, bacteriological, virological and mycological. Routine analyses of samples from Varna, Shumen and Targovishte are also performed here, as well as expertise of soils, plants and plant products, seed and planting material.

The diagnostic regional laboratory of RFSD-Varna is part of the national laboratory-diagnostic network for laboratory analyses, diagnostics and identification of quarantine pests, which includes 7 regional laboratories methodically guided by CPQL. This modern, high-tech national complex is a structure-defining element of the entire PSC process at all stages – production of plants and plant production, import, export, trade, and a part of the sanitary barrier against harmful potential. Each laboratory is specialised in a given aspect of plant health and in certain types of analyses for larger regions.

Let us return briefly to the question of the role of PSC, carried out by RFSD-Varna, for plants and plant products intended for export.

The main export of Bulgarian plants and plant production – through Varna Port – is destined for the countries of the European Community. This share has reached 67%! Which means that Bulgarian goods, after phytosanitary control, move freely on the territory of the Community. And this means: these goods are 100% guaranteed free from harmful organisms! To date, there has not been a single notification concerning the export of Bulgarian plant production through the Varna Border Crossing Point!

A new element in our practice is the already ongoing export of Bulgarian plant commodities to new markets in third countries – New Zealand, Vietnam, China, India. PSC for these goods is subject to increased requirements, with specific demands and additional analyses regarding quarantine pests. This has required us, in the course of work, to redefine certain practices – increasing preliminary control, and demonstrating on site to foreign experts that we work in accordance with FAO international standards for phytosanitary control and the relevant survey protocols for given pests.

Global climate change and the avalanche-like growth of trade turnover are enhancing the transboundary transfer, activity and behaviour of invasive pests. In this respect Bulgaria is no exception. In 2016, on the territory of Varna Municipality, an infestation by the leafhopper Metcalfa pruinosa was recorded. How do you manage to deal with this very dangerous pest?

The leafhopper originates from North America and is now recorded on all continents. In 2016 an entomological expedition, formed by our specialists and researchers from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and the University of Viterbo in Italy, established damage caused by the pest on many woody and herbaceous species. The humid climatic conditions influenced by the sea and the absence of natural enemies favour the development of the leafhopper. Treatments with biocides did not yield results. Foreign experience has reconfirmed the fact that the biological method most effectively controls populations of *Metcalfa pruinosa*. The parasitoid *Neodryinus typhlocybae*, introduced from North America, successfully reduces pest populations. This is convincingly demonstrated by the results in France, Italy, Switzerland and Greece.

In 2017 Varna Municipality financed a pilot project for biological control of the leafhopper. Plant protection specialists from RFSD-Varna are actively involved in its implementation. At the beginning of 2017 the bio-agent was delivered and released in nesting sites in the city parks and gardens. However, several years are needed for its good establishment and for reaching its active potential. When equilibrium is achieved, the populations of the pest and of the bio-agent will reach lower levels. Biological control does not aim at complete eradication of the invasive species, but rather at “peaceful coexistence” with its natural enemy at very low population levels.

Monitoring in October 2017 established that the project is working, reducing the density of the pest, restoring ecological balance and thereby protecting the ecosystem and human health.

Mr. Yordanov, I would like to ask you for some final words, which should include certain trends and forecasts regarding phytosanitary control at the “external gate” of the EU – Varna Port.

The trends and strategic directions regarding PSC are clearly outlined. Our export is oriented towards the EU countries, but this stable trend in no way excludes the positioning of Bulgarian plant production on new markets in third countries. This on the one hand; on the other hand – Varna Port is an external border of the EU and the responsibilities and commitments for implementing effective PSC are increasing every year.

Allow me to use this platform to highlight one fact. The maintenance of the system for official control and other activities for surveillance and monitoring at all stages of the production of plants and plant products, their import and export, processing and trade is carried out in an unstable, high-risk environment – global changes in climatic characteristics, dynamics and increasing turbulence of the phytosanitary situation. The success of this broad-scale mission depends entirely on the professional capacity and high level of expertise of Bulgarian plant protection specialists, as well as on the availability of innovative, integrated technological equipment. If, with the help of an adequate state policy and financial provision, we manage to increase the capacity and capabilities of these factors, PSC in Bulgaria will continue to be an indispensable, decisive factor and a European standard for ensuring a high health status of plants and plant products.

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