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# Overview of the activities and projects on *Xylella fastidiosa* of the International Olive Council (IOC)

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The International Olive Council is the world's only international intergovernmental organization in the field of olive oil and table olives. It was set up in 1959 under the auspices of the United Nations. The Council is a decisive player in contributing to the sustainable and responsible development of olive growing and serves as a world forum for discussing policymaking issues and tackling present and future challenges.

For this reason, it is the ideal framework for driving effective multilateral cooperation among all its member countries to help find joint solutions to any problems and to encourage collaborative research and development activities on topics of general interest to Members.

These activities help to convert the objectives and aspirations of individual countries into collective efforts. Communication, cooperation and coordination to achieve a common objective and information sharing are just some of the benefits of collective action channeled through joint projects.

In October 2015, the new International Agreement on Olive Oil and Table Olives, 2015, was negotiated in Geneva under the umbrella of UNCTAD. This new Agreement will enter into force on 1 January 2017 and lays down the terms of reference for the IOC to carry out activities for the benefit of its countries. The new Agreement has many objectives in different spheres ranging from chemistry and standardization to technical cooperation and promotion. In the specific case of technical cooperation, its aims are:

- to promote technical cooperation and research and development in the olive sector by encouraging the cooperation of public or private bodies and/or entities, whether national or international;
- to conduct activities for the identification, preservation and utilization of the gene sources of olive trees;
- to study the interaction between olive growing and the environment, particularly with a view to promoting environmental conservation and sustainable production, and to ensure the integrated and sustainable development of the sector;
- to foster the transfer of technology through training activities in the fields connected with the olive sector by organizing international, regional and national activities;
- to encourage the exchange of information and experience on olive growing in the phytosanitary field.

Beside these key objectives assigned in the Agreement, the member countries have tasked the IOC to work on issues relating to *Xylella fastidiosa* for which it is a reference marker.

*Xylella* is a problem of close concern to all the member countries of the IOC, which produce almost 98 per cent of the world's olive oil.

In 2015, to try to grapple with this problem, the IOC brought together representatives from international organizations such as EPPO, EFSA and the EU as well as from the Ministries of Agriculture of France, Italy and Spain to fix the terms of reference of an international IOC workshop on the subject of *X. fastidiosa*.

In the meantime, the IOC has given its support for projects submitted under the EU Horizon 2020 programme to find solutions to this problem.

In recent years, the IOC has implemented various R & D projects as part of its technical cooperation programme. One in particular – the RESGEN project – has brought together 22 producer member countries with the common aim of conserving, collecting and using their genetic olive resources. Each country has morphologically characterized its autochthonous varieties and created a reference collection housing most of the genetic variability in the *Olea europaea* species present in their country. More than 1300 accessions have been recovered.

In addition to the 22 national reference collections created under the project, the IOC has also set up and recognized three world collections to which all the plant material recovered and conserved by the individual countries is being shipped. These three world collections are located in Cordoba, Marrakech and Izmir. Clearly, this is just a first step. A new project will shortly get off the ground using molecular markers (microsatellites) and a joint methodology to characterize the plant material held in the reference national and world collections in order to shed light on the ever-persistent problem of homonymy and synonymy.

The IOC is willing to make all this plant material available to the scientific community to allow testing for varietal resistance/tolerance of the *Xylella* bacterium. This can be done either through agreements with the IOC and with the countries that ship the material or by implementing an *ad hoc* project. This wealth of varietal material could be the starting point for projects and training activities for member countries which will thus have the opportunity to see the problem at first hand and learn how to handle it.

At the end of 2016 (28-30 November), IOC and CIHEAM organized, at the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari (IAMB), the international workshop on “*Xylella fastidiosa: a serious worldwide challenge for the safeguard of olive trees*”. The workshop included sessions by international specialists, a field technical visit to the demarcated area of *Xylella* in the South of Puglia and a round table to identify common measures.

The purpose of the meeting was to provide an update on the current situation and the development of the bacterium in order to propose recommendations to prevent, identify, and combat this infection. To this end, the organizers had invited specialists from some national and international institutions, namely the Italian Research Council (CNR), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization (EPPO), the French Agency for Food, Environment and Occupational Health & Safety (ANSES), the Council for Agricultural Research and Agricultural Economic Analysis (CREA), the Centre for Agronomic Research, Experimentation and Training (CRSFA), the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC-FAO), the Directorate General for Health (European Commission), the University of Basilicata, the University of Foggia and the University of Bari.

Following the opening speech by the Secretary General of CIHEAM, Cosimo Lacirignola, the subjects addressed during the first day, chaired by Francesco Serafini, Head of the IOC Department of Research & Development and the Environment, and Françoise Petter of the EPPO, concerned the monitoring tests carried out on the bacterium and its vector, strategies and agricultural measures to combat the rapid decline syndrome in olive trees, plant certification, research, current legislation and the instruments available to monitor the bacteria and detect it in its early stages.

The participants, including the Vice Chairperson of the IOC Advisory Committee and the representatives of some IOC member countries (Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Egypt, the EU, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Uruguay), could observe the impact of *Xylella fastidiosa* on the ground as well as the symptoms of infestation, familiarize with the

sampling techniques used on plant material and vector insects and examine the results of the tolerance/resistance tests carried out on different olive varieties.

During the round table session, coordinated by CIHEAM-IAMB, the participants shared their concerns regarding the disease and highlighted the need to strengthen scientific, technical and political collaboration among countries, to create a forum for the exchange of information and to support the quarantine laboratories in member countries to prevent the proliferation of the bacterium through the international trade of plants and plant material by adopting a certification procedure. They also recommended some measures to strengthen cooperation between the IOC, and international organizations currently working on this disease, namely the CIHEAM, the FAO (IPPC), EPPO and the CNR, which invited the IOC to contribute to the work of an *ad hoc* committee in the EU Horizon 2020 research project initiative on *X. fastidiosa* (XF-Actors).

At the end of the workshop, the Executive Director of the IOC, Abdellatif Ghedira, thanked the specialists from IOC member countries, which account for 94% of olive growing worldwide, the Vice Chairperson of the Advisory Committee and the international experts. He indicated that *Xylella fastidiosa* is one of the priorities of the Executive Secretariat and recalled that, in addition to the IOC's role as an international centre for documentation and information on the sector, the International Agreement on Olive Oil and Table Olives (2015) gave particular importance to international cooperation and to scientific and technical exchanges on olive growing among member countries.