2020, International Year of Plant Health

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) presented last December the International Year of Plant Health (AISV) of the United Nations in 2020, whose objective is to raise global awareness on how to protect Plant health can help eradicate hunger, reduce poverty, protect the environment and boost economic development.

Plants make up 80 percent of the food we eat and produce 98 percent of the oxygen we breathe. However, they face the constant and growing threat of pests and diseases.

Each year, up to 40 percent of food crops worldwide are lost due to pests and plant diseases. This causes annual losses in agricultural trade of more than US $ 220 billion, makes millions of people hungry and severely harms agriculture, the main source of income for poor rural communities.

Therefore, policies and measures to promote plant health are essential to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

“Plants are the fundamental basis for life on Earth and are the most important pillar of human nutrition. But having healthy plants is not something we can take for granted, ”said FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu, presenting the Year in line with the meeting of the UN Organization Council.

Climate change and human activities are altering ecosystems, reducing biodiversity and creating conditions in which pests can thrive. At the same time, travel and international trade have tripled in the last decade and can quickly spread pests and diseases all over the world, causing significant damage to native plants and the environment.

"As in the case of human or animal health, prevention is better than cure in the phytosanitary field," said the head of FAO.

Protecting plants from pests and diseases is much more cost effective than dealing with large-scale phytosanitary emergencies. Pests and diseases are often impossible to eradicate once they have been established, and their management requires a lot of time and money.

Qu also urged to act quickly, noting that there is still much to do to ensure plant health.

“In this International Year and throughout this Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we dedicate the necessary resources and increase our commitment to plant health. Let us act for people and the planet, ”said the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, in a message read during the event.

The following ministers also participated in the event: Edward Centeno Gadea, Minister of Agriculture and Livestock of Nicaragua; Andrew Doyle, Secretary of State of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine Environment of Ireland; Jaana Husu-Kallio, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland; and Tamara Finkelstein, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of the United Kingdom.

In his opening address, the Director-General of FAO commended the Government of Finland for taking the initiative to propose a year dedicated to plant health and coordinate efforts to arrive at his statement.

What will happen in the International Year of Plant Health?

FAO and its International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) will lead the activities to make AISV a success and to promote plant health beyond 2020.

The Year will emphasize prevention and protection, and the role we can each play in guaranteeing and promoting plant health.

The key objectives of the AISV are: to raise awareness about the importance of healthy plants to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; highlight the impact of plant health on food security and ecosystem functions; and share best practices on how to keep plants healthy while protecting the environment.

By preventing the spread and introduction of pests in new areas, governments, farmers and other actors in the food chain - such as the private sector - can save billions of dollars and ensure access to quality food.

Keeping plants or plant products free of pests and diseases also helps facilitate trade and

guarantees access to markets, especially for developing countries. For this, it is important to strengthen adherence to internationally harmonized phytosanitary regulations and standards.

In combating pests and diseases, farmers should adopt - and policy makers encourage use of environmentally friendly methods, such as integrated pest management, to help keep plants healthy while protecting the environment.

Governments, legislators and policy makers should empower phytosanitary protection organizations and other relevant institutions, and provide them with adequate human and financial resources. They should also invest more in research and dissemination related to plant health, as well as innovative practices and technologies.

Strategic partnerships and collaboration with all stakeholders - including governments, academic and research institutions, civil society and the private sector - are also essential to achieve the objectives of the AISV, according to the FAO Director General.

FAO and its International Plant Protection Convention are already leading global efforts, for example, to ensure that international standards on phytosanitary measures are developed, in order to support plant health and that countries benefit from their large-scale application.

In the case of the corn cogworm worm - a pest that spreads rapidly and devours crops - FAO has been coordinating global efforts to combat the insect and curb its progress, through the development and promotion of innovative technologies for surveillance and early warning, and providing governments and farmers with the best tools and knowledge to fight the plague.

Other initiatives to boost plant health

The presentation of the AISV was followed by a round table on plant health at FAO headquarters.

To attract public attention and increase knowledge about plant health, FAO has organized a photography contest, in which amateur and professional photographers have been asked to share photos of healthy and diseased plants.

The AISV website also offers a series of tips on what everyone can do to safeguard plant health.

For example, travelers should be careful when carrying plants and plant products. And attention should be paid when requesting plants and plant products on the Internet or through postal services, since packages can easily bypass the usual phytosanitary controls.