

2020: the International Year of Plant Health

Mirko Montuori – FAO

Despite being marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 should not only be remembered as the year of lock-downs, remote working and stimulus checks, but also as the International Year of Plant Health (IYPH).

Back in 2018, the United Nations General Assembly had proclaimed 2020 the International Year of Plant Health to raise global awareness of how protecting plant health can help end hunger, reduce poverty, protect the environment, and boost economic development.

In particular, UN Member States aimed at public awareness among the public and decision makers of the importance of plant health to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the risks that each person's behavior poses to plant health; to increase resources dedicated to plant health; and to promote good practices, knowledge, research and partnerships.

We often neglect it, but plants are life: they are the basis of our diets and produce the oxygen we breathe; they also provide medicines and shelter to many; and they are part of our traditions and heritage.

Yet, they are under constant threat, especially by pests and diseases, which are introduced to new areas through anthropic activities such as travel and trade, and natural factors like climate change.

Somehow, the current pandemic showed the world how interconnected humans, animals and the environment, including plants are, and how imperative it is for people to respect ecosystems and care for animal and plant health for their own health.

FAO and the Secretariat of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) facilitated the implementation of the Year by setting up an [IYPH International Steering Committee](#), which was tasked to develop an IYPH action plan.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact of the International Year of Plant Health, which nevertheless counts to date over 600 events across all regions of the world, and a large number and variety of advocacy initiatives.

The IYPH was officially launched by the FAO Director-General, Dr. QU Dongyu on 2 December 2019 at FAO headquarters. The event included a podium attended by the FAO Director-General, the Ministers of Agriculture of Ireland and Nicaragua, and Permanent Secretaries from Finland and the United Kingdom. The event triggered high attention by the global phytosanitary community, the media and social media platforms. At this occasion, the official IYPH website was launched at www.fao.org/iyp.

Little was then known about the virus which would have disrupted the world's health system and economy in the following months. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, FAO with input from the IYPH International Steering Committee agreed to postpone some of the IYPH key global events into 2021. These include the first International Plant Health Conference (now scheduled on 28 June to 1 July 2021 in Helsinki and virtually); and the IYPH closing ceremony (now scheduled on 1 July 2021).

Some of the initiatives worth mentioning are the production of a [communication toolkit](#), composed of a communications guide, brochure, and activity book; the creation of an [IYPH YouTube playlists](#), with many videos produced in several languages; the [Trello board](#) (for social media posts); three IYPH podcasts by

[UN News](#) and [FAO](#); and the monthly [IYPH newsletter](#). All IYPH graphic materials and publications were made publicly available, including logotypes in over thirty languages.

FAO and the IPPC Secretariat has also collected human interest stories related to plant health, resulting in the publication of twelve stories, and launched a photo contest on 2nd December, with deadline on 15th January 2021, an art and drawing competition for children, and "A day in the life of a plant health professional" social media campaign.

Countries also stepped up in promoting IYPH-related initiatives, including the use of the IYPH visual identity, including by issuing [twenty-two stamps](#) and minting three commemorative coins.

Three key initiatives are also being promoted to secure a lasting legacy for the IYPH.

First, the government of Zambia proposed the proclamation of an [International Day of Plant Health \(IDPH\)](#). The proposal was endorsed by the 27th session of the FAO Committee on Agriculture and the 165th session of the FAO Council. Next steps will be the review of the proposal by the FAO Conference in July 2021, and the subsequent possible declaration of 12 May as IDPH by the United Nations General Assembly by December 2021.

Another ongoing IYPH initiative is the global study on the assessment of climate change impacts on plant health, which is expected to be presented at a high-level event on 1 June 2021, and further discussed at the first International Plant Health Conference in Helsinki (or virtually) on 28 June to 1 July 2021.

Finally, the IPPC Secretariat has been promoting the drafting of a [youth declaration on plant health](#) as another possible IYPH legacy.

Overall, much has been done to increase the profile and importance of plant health globally. It is hoped that this momentum continues and is strengthened with the support of all stakeholders.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of FAO.