The importance of communication on phytosanitary issues. The case of Xylella fastidiosa

Brunel S., D'Onghia A.M.

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The case of *Xylella fastidiosa*

Sarah Brunel[1], Anna Maria D'Onghia[2],

[1] International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) - FAO, Italy
[2] CIHEAM, Istituto Agronomico Mediterraneo di Bari - Italy

The bacterium *Xylella fastidiosa* (Xanthomonadaceae) is a quarantine pest known for its negative social and economic impact on agriculture, the environment and trade. Various strains of this bacterium can infest more than 350 host plants, including important crops such as grape, *Citrus* spp. and olive trees. The outbreak of this bacterium in the Puglia region in southern Italy has led to a rarely seen social and media crisis. Local associations and individual citizens opposed emergency measures such as the up-rooting of trees, amassed strong opposition in the media through social networks, and ultimately sued the authorities and scientists in court. Local authorities and scientists were accused of having voluntarily introduced the bacterium.

To face the tremendous challenge of tackling pests that increasingly cross borders through trade of plants and plant products, National Plant Protection Organizations (NPPO) are the official institutions in charge of preventing the introduction and spread of pests in their territories, as defined by the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). NPPOs have the authority and mandate to take measures to prevent, control or manage *X. fastidiosa* within their country. However, the burden of responsibilities of an NPPO are too often at odds with the little financial and human resources NPPOs have at hand to operate in a comprehensive and efficient way to face the challenges of a pest incursion.

Communication is an essential, but too often forgotten, strategic component in responding to a phytosanitary outbreak. A communication plan would strive to unite all stakeholders by informing them on how they are impacted by the outbreak both separately and together. A communication plan would also engage stakeholders to conduct activities that will facilitate the implementation of the contingency plan. Communication aspects have seldom been explored in the realm of plant protection. The outbreak of *X. fastidiosa* in the Puglia region represents a rich opportunity to gain knowledge on how to set an efficient communication plan on this pest. These lessons could be applied to any other quarantine pest in the future.

Learning from the experience in the Puglia region, and inspired by other experiences, proposals for the setting of a communication plan for contingency planning for *X. fastidiosa* could include:

- Outlining the roles and responsibilities in a communication plan: who should be involved, what is the line of command, what are the activities to be undertaken? In terms of governance, it is important that the message be centralized and issued by the NPPO.
- Defining messages to be communicated on *Xylella fastidiosa*: defining clear, straightforward, succinct messages is fundamental for the success of a contingency plan. Messages should be adapted to the national or local context and should communicate clearly to everyone the status of the pest in the country. These messages are most appropriate to situations in which pest is absent or of limited distribution in the country.
- Identification of the activities within the communication plan, including meetings with the media, press conferences, organizing training workshops to visit production places and international workshops to exchange information, developing communication material such as webpages, social media accounts, fliers, videos, etc.