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EPPO Contingency Exercise Workshop for a Forestry Pest, Zlatibor, Serbia, 2018-11-27/29

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An EPPO Contingency Planning Workshop for a Forestry Pest was held in Zlatibor, Serbia, between 27 and 29 November 2018. In total, 55 experts from 21 EPPO member countries attended the 3-day workshop. Participants were split into four groups for the exercise and each group acted as an 'outbreak management team' for a scenario based on the finding of a quarantine pest for forestry. Only when the exercise had started were participants informed that the outbreak scenario centred around the fictitious discovery of pinewood nematode (*Bursaphelenchus xylophilus*) in the Tara National Park in Serbia. As the scenario developed, each team had to organize themselves to manage a number of issues designed to mimic the development of an outbreak over the first month following its detection. It was clear from the feedback from participants that that contingency planning workshop was a valuable exercise for EPPO to conduct and participants highlighted the importance of it to prepare themselves for real-life situations.

Background

An EPPO Contingency Planning Workshop for a Forestry Pest was held in Zlatibor, Serbia, between 27 and 29 November 2018. The workshop was organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Serbia, the Faculty of Forestry of the University of Belgrade, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, UK (Defra).

In total, 55 experts from across the EPPO region attended the workshop for 3 days. Participants were split into four groups for the exercise and each group acted as an 'outbreak management team' for a scenario based on a fictitious finding of a quarantine pest for forestry. Three groups conducted the exercise in English and one group conducted the exercise in Serbian.

The aims of the workshop were to:

(1) simulate the experience of a phytosanitary emergency;
(2) experiment with responses to an emergency;
(3) test whether relevant contingency plans are available and fit for purpose;
(4) test the availability and relevance of other resources, e.g. EPPO guidance;
(5) provide experience in communicating key messages during an emergency;
(6) learn why and how to develop contingency plans;
(7) learn how to communicate with the general public and different stakeholders in the case of a phytosanitary emergency;
(8) learn how to carry out an emergency response exercise.

To make the exercise realistic, details of the outbreak scenario were not shared with participants in advance, but the necessary information on the chosen pest, reference materials, etc., was provided during the workshop or available online.

Scenario

The scenario developed over the course of a month following the first fictitious finding of *Bursaphelenchus xylophilus* in the Tara National Park in Serbia. (Note that this was only a scenario for the workshop and *B. xylophilus* has not been recorded from Serbia!) The main purpose was not to learn specifically about the biology and ecology of *B. xylophilus* (though we did, of course, from the experts present) but to re-create the confusion and stress of a real emergency and learn from that experience how to pull together an effective team to manage the response to an outbreak.

The scenario began on a Friday morning in May, when a laboratory report of a positive sample of *B. xylophilus* was submitted to each outbreak management group. Over the course of the next 3 days (1 month in the scenario time), the scenario developed where more pine trees were reported showing symptoms, the laboratory confirmed the identification of the pest and requests were made for information

(and reassurance that everything was under control) from the minister, the general public and neighbouring countries.

The inputs came in rapidly to the teams, just like in a real-life situation, and they were varied. One could class inputs as problems or issues that each group had to deal with as the scenario unfolded. For example, one input was about the nematologist's priorities: his daughter was getting married the next day and therefore his mind was on things other than identifying samples sent into the laboratory. The teams had to deal with these 'staff issues' as well as managing the outbreak itself.

Some inputs were offers of help from local enthusiasts, such as the use of drones to survey the area, and from a philanthropist who wanted to provide funds to help mitigate the problem. Other inputs were not so helpful but still needed a response from the outbreak management teams. For example, one input was from a Professor Disgustidov, who had his own firm ideas on what the problem was. He suspected acid rain was the cause of the problem. He had studied this for most of his career and refused to believe that pine trees were being damaged by *B. xylophilus*. Another issue that had to be dealt with by the teams was a plant nursery situated just on the border of the national park that was selling host plants. The teams had to decide if they should put a stop order on the nursery on selling all plants or only on host plants of pine wood nematode, and, importantly, they had to ensure that communication with the nursery was clear and informative.

On top of all the inputs, the outbreak team had to manage the outbreak itself. Each team had to manage surveys to evaluate the area affected, assess inspectors' and laboratory reports and decide on the size of the regulated area and what measures should be taken within the regulated area. Each team had a lot of discussions on the size of the regulated area and the intensive survey area, and following the confirmation of the pest from the laboratory reports, the area required for the clear-cut.

Although at the beginning of the scenario each group had to select a leader who acted as the head of the plant quarantine unit, the groups were deliberately not given any guidance on how they should structure themselves internally. As the scenario developed, it became clear that dealing with a high influx of inputs was better managed if the groups divided into smaller teams. In addition, each team already had key skills, with some team members having more experience in managing or public speaking, for example, compared with others. Thus, in general, each team, over time, divided into small groups to deal with the outbreak. In general, each team divided into four small groups to deal with the outbreak: (1) operations (practical issues and resources), (2) communications (internal and external, written and spoken), (3) scientific and technical (science, mapping, modelling, risk assessment etc.), (4) planning (overall management of the response, including policy aspects).

Guidance

Each outbreak management team had a facilitator from the planning group whose role was to ensure that every participant was aware of the purpose and rules of the exercise, ensure that everyone got involved and benefitted from the exercise and, when needed, provide guidance to the team if they were going off track or falling behind.

In addition, a central desk was set up which consisted of an EPPO desk, a Serbian desk and a communications and media desk where teams could request relevant documents and information as the scenario progressed. Information available included maps of the region, relevant EPPO Standards, such as the newly revised PM 9/1 (6) Bursaphelenchus xylophilus *and its vectors: procedures for official control* (EPPO, 2018) or PM 9/10 *Generic elements for contingency plans* (EPPO, 2009). From the Serbian desk, key information was available on the local area and a draft Serbian contingency plan was available. The media desk was manned by Nenad Sebek, a journalist who provided guidance when needed on drafting press releases or dealing with the media.

Media training

In addition to the group facilitators, there was a central team of three, plus the journalist who offered advice and training on communications. Communication inputs requested as part of the scenario included a draft press release, a list of frequently asked questions (with suggested answers) and facilitation of a public meeting (where other teams acted as the audience). In addition, the scenario included a pretend TV interview. Nenad Sebek provided key training to each group to prepare them for these outputs. The communications aspects were particularly appreciated, and the programme was adjusted during the workshop to ensure that each group could role play a public meeting for concerned residents and stakeholders, with the journalist conducting interviews and providing feedback.

Feedback

This was the first time EPPO had run an exercise of this complexity, and probably the first time a 3-day contingency exercise for a plant pest outbreak had been run in Europe. Therefore, it was important to obtain feedback from the participants to help improve the process of future workshops. Evaluation at the end of the workshop was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, participants reviewed what their groups had got right and what they would do differently another time or when managing a real outbreak.

Each group indicated that they had learned significant lessons about dealing with an outbreak. Early and regular communications, clarity of roles, a clear command structure and good administrative support to keep track of

information coming in and going out were all found to be important. The need to step back from the immediate problems and review the situation together from time to time was also mentioned.

In the second phase of the evaluation, participants made suggestions about what EPPO should do the same and it should consider doing differently another contingency planning workshop was organized.

All participants agreed that the workshop was well organized. The fact that participants came from a number of different backgrounds added to the learning process. Participants really appreciated the work that had gone into designing the scenario and considered that the inputs were diverse and tested the skills of the outbreak management team in dealing with an outbreak and the everyday problems that are associated with such a scenario. The media training was highlighted as a very positive component of the workshop, and participants considered that they learnt useful skills for dealing with press releases and of course the general public.

Ideas for improvement included the suggestion that more time could be spent on explaining the rules of the exercise before the start and perhaps the number and the rate at which inputs were delivered to the teams could be a little less intense. Participants also suggested that there could be more time for training on communications and more immediate feedback from facilitators on the outputs produced by groups.

References

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