Conference on invasive alien species during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2024)

Border controls on Invasive Alien Species

Residence Palace, Brussels

14th March 2024

Conference Report

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1. Introduction

This report summarises the outcomes of the conference undertaken within the framework of the project "Support in the facilitation of a conference on invasive alien species during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2024)" (IUCN Contract 4500943876/original). The conference, held on 14th March 2024, was designed specifically to discuss issues around effective border controls as a key element in preventing the introduction of invasive alien species (IAS) into the European Union.

More specifically, the objectives of the conference were to understand: how effective are the procedures in place to identify/confiscate illegal shipments; what is functional and works well; what are the challenges regarding controls/checks, detection and identification of species and confiscation of goods; what are the training needs of border control authorities; and what is needed at national or European level to make border controls more effective and efficient (e.g. cooperation).

The conference was designed to allow Member States (MS) the opportunity to gather and provide feedback on the efficiency of implementation for the different provisions under Article 15 of the EU IAS Regulation (Regulation (EU) 1143/2014), as well as to identify challenges and needs across various areas and sectors related to border controls.

2. Conference organisation and structure

The conference took place as a one-day event on 14th March 2024, at the Residence Palace conference centre located in Brussels, Belgium. This was a non-mandatory event organised under the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

2.1. Organising team

The conference was organised by the Belgian Federal Public Service of Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment (FPS Health), in collaboration with IUCN and the European Commission DG-ENV IAS team. The Belgian team consisted of the following six members: Maud Istasse and Nora Claeys (FPS Health), Arnaud Jacobs and Jane Anne-Marie Reniers (Belgian National Scientific Secretariat on IAS), Sonia Vanderhoeven (Belgian Biodiversity Platform) and Tim Adriaens (INBO, Chair of the Belgian National Scientific Council on IAS). The DG-ENV IAS team consisted of three representatives, Daniel Nuijten, Juan Pérez Lorenzo and Leonardo Mazza. The IUCN organising team consisted of the following 11 members: Ana Nunes, Katie Costello, Kevin Smith and Tamryn Venter (IUCN Cambridge office), Konstantin Gospodinov, Aurore Trottet, Vittorio Bellotto, Jose Luis Postigo Sánchez, Sanne Put,

Lodovica Freyberg (IUCN European Regional Office), and Riccardo Scalera (IUCN Species Survival Commission Invasive Species Specialist Group).

2.2. Participants

2.2.1. Invitations and initial survey

It was decided that participation would be by invitation only, and should include delegates from environmental inspectorates, Animal and Plant Health authorities and customs authorities representing the various MS. For this, invitations were sent out via various channels, in a concerted effort aiming to have representatives of the different authorities from every MS attending the conference. Upon registration, participants were requested to fill out a short survey, so that the organising team had advance knowledge of the level of understanding amongst participants relating to IAS and Article 15, as well as to their expectations regarding the topics to be covered at the conference.

2.2.2. Participants attending and initial survey results

A good overview of some of the results gathered through the registration form and survey mentioned above was presented by the Chair of the event (Tim Adriaens, INBO) during the conference opening (see conference programme in Section 2.3. below). However, due to a few last minute registrations, the final number of attendants and other figures shown in that presentation are slightly different than some of those mentioned below.

In total, there were 92 participants in attendance, with 18 different MS represented (Figure 1), as well as two speakers from the UK, and one speaker from Australia and one speaker from the Reunion Island attending remotely. The numbers of representatives from the different types of authorities present at the meeting were 30 for Environmental authorities, 14 for Animal Health, 10 for Plant Health, 12 for Customs authorities and 26 for other authorities or organisations.

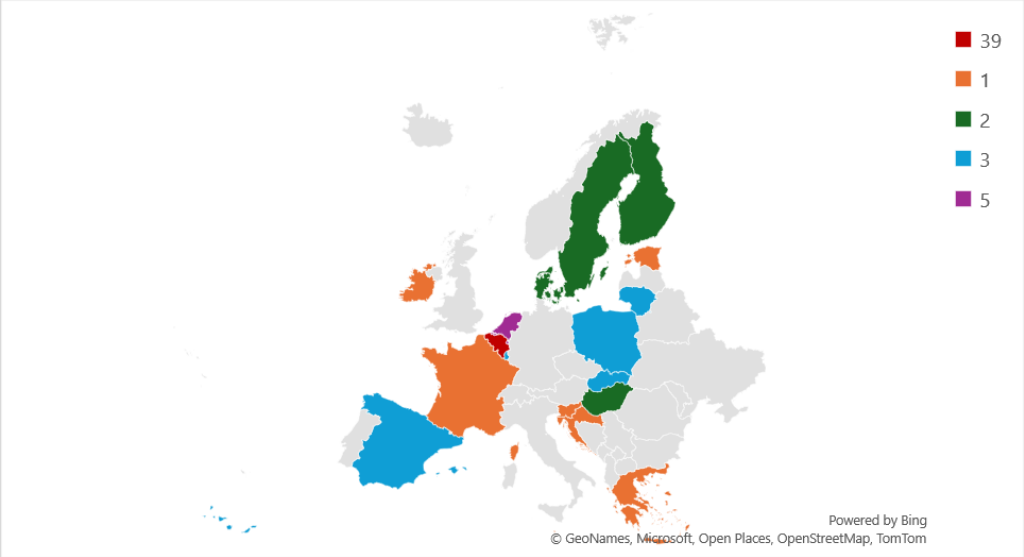

Figure 1: Number of participants from different Member States who attended the conference, excluding the organising team (N = 74).

In what concerns participants' knowledge regarding IAS policy and/or the EU IAS Regulation (Regulation (EU) 1143/2014), 45% had basic knowledge, followed by 32% with good knowledge and 14% with extensive knowledge. Only 9% reported having no knowledge on the topic. A high percentage of 43% expressed having basic knowledge regarding IAS technical and scientific related issues, followed by 27% having good knowledge of this and 16% having no knowledge. When asked specifically about their responsibilities regarding the implementation of Article 15 of the EU IAS Regulation, 40% reported being indirectly involved in the topic (N= 37), 25% directly involved (N= 23), and 35% were not involved (N= 32) (Figure 2).

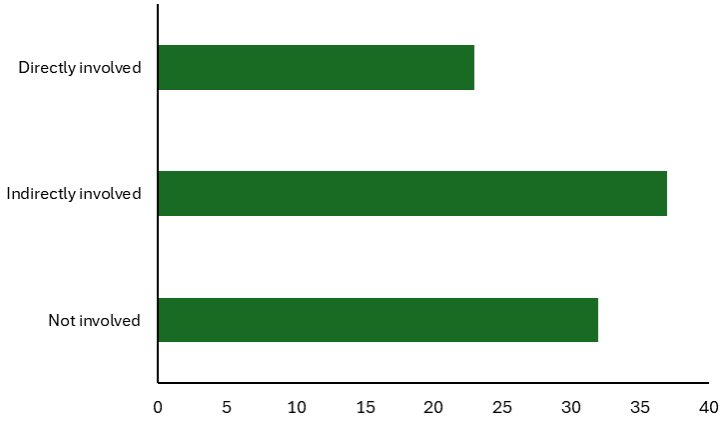

Figure 2: Responsibilities of the event participants regarding the implementation of Article 15 of the EU IAS Regulation.

2.3. Programme

The conference was divided into various sessions, commencing with a welcome and opening remarks by the Chair, Tim Adriaens, followed by the Belgian Minister of Climate, the Environment, Sustainable Development and Green Deal (Figure 3). This was followed by two plenary sessions during the morning, with topical presentations, as well as questions and answers, before breaking for lunch. In the afternoon, participants split into four different pre-defined breakout groups for more targeted discussions, before reconvening to discuss the findings of the day in plenary. The final programme of the conference is presented in Table 1 below.

Figure 3: Plenary session © Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU (CC BY 2.0 DEED via Flickr).

Table 1: Final programme of the conference.

8.30	**Registration / Coffee**
9.15	**Conference opening** Tim Adriaens, Chair, Research Institute for Nature and Forest (INBO), Belgium
9.20	**Welcome speech** Federal Minister of Climate, the Environment, Sustainable Development and Green Deal, Belgium
9.30	**The 2023 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report on Invasive alien species with a focus on prevention** Prof. Helen Roy, Centre for Ecology & Hydrology & Co-chair of IPBES IAS assessment, United Kingdom & Sonia Vanderhoeven, Science Officer, Belgian Biodiversity Platform
9.45	**Article 15 of the EU Regulation on invasive alien species** Daniel Nuijten, The IAS Team, DG Environment, European Commission
10.00	**Tools to support pathway interception of IAS. Experiences from the Netherlands** Johan van Valkenburg, Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA)
10.15	**Reunion island, a European confetti in the Indian Ocean. How can we protect this biodiversity hot spot from biological invasions? (online)** Eve Balard, Department of Environment, Planning and Housing (DEAL), Reunion Island, France
10.30	**Designing procedures for effective collaboration and prioritization. The Belgian approach.** Maud Istasse, Belgian Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment & Jane Reniers, National Scientific secretariat on invasive alien species
10.45	**Questions & responses**
11.00	**Coffee break**
11.30	**Monitoring internet trade for invasive alien species (online)** Jacob Maher, Faculty of Sciences, Engineering and Technology, The University of Adelaide, Australia
11.50	**Challenges for detection of contaminants: the case of the New-Zealand flatworm** Nikol Kmentova, Center for Environmental Sciences (CMK), Hasselt University, Belgium
12.10	**Inspections for Non-native Species at the UK Border – current situation and long-term aims**

	Rob Wakefield, Non-Native Species Inspectorate, Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), United Kingdom
12.30	**Overview of the training material prepared for Member States** Riccardo Scalera, IUCN ISSG
12.50	**Questions & responses**
13.00	**Lunch**
14.00	**Presentation of the breakout session**
14.15	**Discussion in groups on experiences and needs to enhance efficient border controls**
16.00	**Coffee break**
16.25	**Summary of the day**
16.45	**Concluding remarks** Hans Stielstra, Deputy Head of Unit for Biodiversity, DG Environment, European Commission
17.00	**Closure**

3. Sessions and respective outcomes

3.1. Morning session: Presentations in plenary

3.1.1. Session 1

Setting the international scene

The talks of the morning session began with a joint presentation by Helen Roy and Sonia Vanderhoeven on the findings from the 'Thematic assessment report on invasive alien species and their control' (IPBES report 2023). This provided a basis for all participants as to what are invasive alien species, how many are established worldwide (37.000 so far), their role as an important driver of biodiversity loss, and why it is necessary to immediately prevent and mitigate the impacts of IAS and more largely, the process of biological invasions. It showed that even if most countries have targets regarding management of invasive alien species, half of them have no management implementation, and for more than 80% of them, no national legislation dedicated to invasive alien species is in place. The IPBES study also highlighted important costs linked to the negative impacts of IAS, estimated to be >US$423 billion in 2019. Invasive alien species is a growing problem worldwide and is facilitated and amplified by, notably, climate change, land-use and sea-land changes and globalisation. Human activities, such as international transport, play a major role in increasing the risk of introduction and

spread of invasive alien species. As a conclusion, the presentation highlighted that prevention and preparedness, especially through pathway management, is the most important course of action and is possible to implement at all levels of the biological invasion process, including at border controls, through e.g. biosecurity measures.

The European framework

Following from this, Daniel Nuijten of the DG-ENV IAS team from the European Commission (EC) provided an overview of Article 15 of the EU IAS Regulation, to better contextualise the background to the conference. It was mentioned that no new structures need to be set up by MS for the implementation of this article, as controls shall be done using pre-existing structures according to article 15.3 of the EU IAS Regulation (e.g. for Animal and Plant health authorities). The EC already has existing resources for MS in place, such as the European Alien Species Information Network (EASIN), EASIN's Notification System (NOTSYS) and some training materials that have been prepared for MS. For example, NOTSYS can be used by MS to report 'Official controls detections' under Article 15, but at the moment this resource is insufficiently used. Finally, it was explained that the prompt sharing of data between MS is extremely important, as well as the synergy and coordination between authorities within MS.

<u>Questions and Answers for Daniel Nuijten</u>

- *Question:* For the Regulation on IAS, in Article 15, it only talks about 'prevention of intentional introduction' of IAS and we have some doubts about whether we do have a harmonised approach in the EU for controlling consignments for the non-intentional introductions, as a lot of IAS come through both intentional and unintentional introductions. Was this distinction made on purpose or not? It would be interesting to hear your opinion because when we detain consignments or perform other actions it is strictly according to the regulation.
    - *Answer:* For IAS of Union concern, there is a ban on both intentional and unintentional introductions, so even though Article 15 is specifying intentional, an introduction unintentionally is legally banned, so there is no unclarity about that. There is no harmonised approach, because inspections, even though we provide the guidelines, are implemented at a MS or even regional level. Thus, MS do choose their own way of implementing this. The European Commission is happy to continue discussions on how to learn from each other, through the IAS Committee and the IAS Expert group. Indeed, official controls is something

that is on our (EC) agenda and we are very happy with the Belgian Presidency for organising this conference. It is something we know we need to improve, and we are at the beginning of the process, where we are developing material and starting discussions. We need to learn from our colleagues in animal and plant health and our colleagues from CITES. We know that more tools are needed, and we are happy to have discussions on which tools are needed. We have no protocols on what exactly to do, but just that introductions cannot happen and that indeed the material needs to be destroyed. We have, especially for the vertebrates, some manuals on which would be the best/most humane way to do this, we do not have this for invertebrates and plants, yet.

National experiences

The talks then turned into reporting national experiences, with Johan van Valkenburg (The Netherlands), Eve Balard (Reunion Island, France; Figure 4), and Maud Istasse and Jane Reniers (Belgium) providing accounts of the tools and procedures that have been found effective for dealing with IAS at border controls in their respective countries. Details on these three presentations are provided below. After these presentations, the Chair opened the floor to the audience for a question and answer session pertaining to the whole Session 1 (Figure 5).

All five PowerPoint presentations from Session 1, provided in full, can be found in Annex 1.

Johan van Valkenburg | The Netherlands | Tools to support pathway interception of IAS. Experiences from the Netherlands.

- Control is done at multiple stages: EU border, points of sales, public areas and private spaces.
- Tools to help identification are: barcodes, factsheets, look-alike sheets, image recognition app, interactive ID keys and field guides.
- These tools to help identification can all be found on Q-Bank, including tools to aid in identification of the plants listed as of Union concern.
- There are draft inspection standards for the inspection for invasive alien plants.
- A survey was completed to determine which weeds are found in potted plants in 2022. These weeds were extracted from the potted plants and grown in a greenhouse. This survey resulted in over 1000 samples, of which specimens were taken, data sequenced, images taken and over 75 species added to the LUCID key. All of them were added to Q-bank to update the database.
- Another problem that is experienced is the misidentification and/or mislabelling of plants species.

- These tools and resources are still a work in progress.

Questions and Answers for Johan van Valkenburg

- *Question:* What is the method used to destroy seeds? We use heat in animal health, but I do not know what is used for plants.
  - *Answer:* They are destroyed at the destruction facility. They are thrown away like grey litter, then I am not exactly sure what happens, they are possibly burned. It is treated like regular waste and thereby preventing it to regrow. In plants we have the big advantage that the ethical aspects are less pronounced than with animals.
- *Question:* What are the apps that you are using for the identification of species? Were they created by your authority or are they general apps that can be found on the internet and used by everyone?
  - *Answer:* We are developing our own apps, because the complication is that plants look different as contaminants in potted plants and are not growing in their 'natural' ways. Therefore, standard plant identification and image recognition apps do not work, because you do not have the properly developed algorithm, due to the absence of a training set to teach the algorithm how to identify it.
- *Question:* In terms of the labelling for intentional introductions, I see that sometimes it is done at the genus level or even higher, but are imports ever labelled at the species level? What dictates how they are labelled? I thought they were just labelled to the CN code, but obviously it is much further than that. Is it done at national level – if you are going to import things, it has to be at this level? I would like to get a better understanding of the labelling.
  - *Answer:* The requirements are standardised at the EU level, with the CN codes. The level of detail required for reporting a consignment for inspection is increasing, whereas before, e.g. in a mixed consignment you would only have to register the three biggest units or species within such a consignment and based on those, an inspection would be targeted or not. Now, gradually, you have to register all commodities, and especially the European Commission is striving that it should all be labelled at a species level. This adds complexities as you have all these cultivars being traded that do not have a proper binominal. Gradually the level of detail is increasing. It has to be done now for plants at species level. If you have to report a consignment – the control system is fed with the requirements for inspection depending on the species or the particular commodity that has a percentage of inspections needed, and I think it applies to all EU Member States, but the level of how the process works varies. For

instance in the Netherlands, all plants on the Union list are in the system so as soon as in any of the listings, one of these names pop up, a red flag pops up and it will be inspected. It does not matter if it is the prohibited species in the consignment or not, it being labelled as such makes it prohibited, like with CITES. For example, any medicine or cosmetic product that is labelled as containing tiger bone, it will be confiscated, irrespective of if there is tiger bone in it or not, that is how it works.

- *Question:* When there is a CN code that does not correspond to the species, what happens then? You have explained that if one of the CN codes that is in the regulation, if you encounter it there is a red flag, and you have a legal basis to destroy it, but in the other case when a species is coming in with an incorrect CN code that does not correspond, how do you tackle Union list IAS coming in if you have no clue?
  - *Answer:* The CN codes do not go to species level, they go to commodity level. But if they do not register the species as it is, the other way to come across it is by accident. The sheer volume of consignments coming in makes it impossible to check everything so then you just stumble upon it. What you can do, at least how it works in the Netherlands, in addition to the compulsory inspections, at some point in time, certain exporting countries or certain exporters or certain importers, if they have had incidents of non-compliance they will be targeted for inspection, even for a consignment that does not have a red flag.
  - *Response to answer:* Okay, so you are moving into an approach that identifies risky donor regions and risky pathways, basically.
  - *Response:* Yes.

Eve Balard | France | Reunion Island, a European confetti in the Indian Ocean. How can we protect this biodiversity hot spot from biological invasions?

- Reunion Island has a high level of endemism and is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, but it also has >34 of the world's 100 worst IAS .
- To try protect the island's biodiversity, lists of invasive alien species are created (10,000 animals and 176 plants) and these invasive alien species are completely banned from the island. Plant regulations are more complicated, and the animal list contains whole groups of species, hence the considerable difference in number of species.
- Reunion Island has only two main gateways, which makes it more feasible to control.
- Since 2022 an annual training day has been organised for customs staff at ports and airports to remind them of the regulation and update them on new regulations and/or species. This

also provides the opportunity for them to ask questions and get to know each other better and to be more responsive when problems arise.

- In 2023, a test hotline that customs staff could contact 24/7 to help with identification and regulations was developed.
- Actions at the port, such as a biosecurity plan, are being developed.
- Border controls have been part of a multi-stakeholder plan to combat invasive species on Reunion Island for 20 years, but there is still a great deal more to be done. For example, increased knowledge of certain groups and tools, regulations with positive lists, and new techniques need to be tested (e.g. sniffer dogs and AI).

Figure 4: Presentation by Eve Balard entitled '*Reunion Island, a European confetti in the Indian Ocean. How can we protect this biodiversity hot spot from biological invasions?*'

Maud Istasse and Jane Reniers | Belgium | Designing procedures for effective collaboration and prioritization. The Belgian Approach.

- Authorities involved in the implementation of Article 15 in Belgium are the Minister of Finance (customs), the federal Minister of Agriculture and the federal Minister of Environment (competent authority responsible for Art. 15).
- All three border controls, freights/cargo, postal package and passenger's luggage, are relevant for invasive alien species.
- There is a need for collaboration between customs, federal environmental inspectors and veterinary and phytosanitary inspectors. This was set up in 2018 in Belgium, through an administrative protocol.
- The federal Ministry of Environment is the enforcing authority of this protocol, and it is its responsibility to ensure an exchange of information, to provide scientific support and conduct risk analyses (e.g. for each IAS), and to enforce rules in the event of infringements.
- A big challenge to collaboration is the flow of information, which needs to be quick and efficient, in order to ensure a rapid response. This requires human and financial capacity, as well as scientific knowledge on how and when to act.
- The IAS Secretariat provides support to border controls in the form of prioritisation, detection and identification, and information flow and coordination.
    - Prioritisation: Prioritise goods that should be controlled. A register of all commonly mislabelled species and a registry of wrong names they are traded under has been set up. If such a name pops up, it needs to be inspected. Additionally, consignments of groups where mislabelling is frequent (aquatic plants and crayfish) are prioritised for physical identity control. Limitations of trade documents (e.g. species being imported that are only identified to the level of 'Insects' or 'Rodents') currently prevent further prioritisation.
    - Detection and identification: Detection of contaminants and the identification of species (i.e. is the species an IAS of Union concern), such as providing tools/support for morphological identification (e.g. ID booklet, list of experts), genetic identification (e.g. manual for taking samples, DNA factsheets) and training of inspectors.
    - Information flow and coordination: Important to be the liaison with regional inspection services (competent for inspection in shops), so that this work feeds into the work that is done at the borders.

Questions and Answers for Maud Istasse and Jane Reniers (Belgium)

- *Question:* When will the booklet that integrates all the protocol, including the new protocol from this year that was mentioned be available?
  - *Answer:* We hope it will be ready in April. We are at the very end of the process and doing final checks to make sure everything is correct in the document.

Figure 5: Session on questions and answers following the presentations from Session 1 of the morning session of the conference.

3.1.2. Session 2

After a short break, the talks recommenced with further case studies relating to the tools and resources available to help detect and identify shipments of IAS, which details can be found below. To begin, Jacob Maher (Australia) provided a (virtual) talk on the web-scraping tools currently in use to monitor the surface, deep and dark web for e-trade of IAS (Figure 6). Nikol Kmentova (Belgium) then provided an overview of the challenges relating to detection of invasive alien flatworms, and indeed it was later remarked that flatworms were a recurring theme throughout the day, being a taxon of interest. Rob Wakefield (UK) then delivered an overview of inspections at UK borders including the main challenges faced and long-term aims. Lastly, Riccardo Scalera (IUCN ISSG) provided an explanation of existing materials to support Article 15, which have been commissioned by the EC and produced by IUCN to support the implementation of the EU IAS Regulation. As with the previous session, the Chair then opened the floor to all participants for questions and answers, the details of which are shown below. Similarly, the slides from these four presentations are also available in Annex 1.

Jacob Maher | Australia | Monitoring internet trade for invasive alien species

- Developing tools using web scraping to investigate and monitor trade in invasive species.
- There are 3 layers of the internet:
    - Surface web: websites that are publicly accessible, do not need passwords or to be accepted into.
    - Deep web: forums, social media, etc. Sites that require a password or you need to be accepted into.
    - Dark web: most encrypted and harder to get to.
- Very little trade of invasive wildlife is happening on the dark web, most of it on the surface and deep web. There is a lack of enforcement on the surface and deep web, so there is no need for people to move trade to the dark web.
- Process used to design projects for investigating trade on the internet: define scope -> gather a list of candidate websites -> select target websites to monitor -> collect data from target websites. The last step can be done manually (although slow) or using python code to automate data collection and store the data in a database where you can analyse it.
- Research done in Australia to search for adverts on the sale of bird, fish, invertebrate and plant species, some of which invasive and/or illegal. For example in fish, it was hard to know the risks of some of the species for which taxonomy has not been described yet. Similarly, for many invertebrates there is insufficient data to accurately evaluate their risk. For plants, sometimes people are purposely mislabelling species, but there are also cases where people are unaware of the problem or do not know the correct taxonomy of the plant. Therefore, improved monitoring and public education is essential to reducing trade.
- The project developed a user interface for all the data collected, so that officers in states and territories in Australia can access this information and use it as a monitoring tool.
- Examples of applications:
    - Enforcement: Officers could take action after finding an advert for the sale of an illegal species in trade.
    - Monitoring: To monitor if a specific species is being traded.
    - Risk assessment: Determine how extensive a certain species is being traded.
- State borders which allow easy trading across, but have their own laws and jurisdiction, can result in different taxonomic classifications and/or differences in which species are illegal and not. This causes confusion and can make enforcement challenging.

Questions and Answers for Jacob Maher

- *Question:* Your web-scraping tool, is it available? Can it be used by other people, and can we adapt it?
  - *Answer:* In its current form, no, simply because of some ethics approval requirements that we have on this. The nature of web scraping means that, and particularly if it is an individual selling things online, there is some inevitability that you capture personal information and data and this becomes a part of your dataset. Even within Australia we are only allowing access to the database and to the website for certain people working in invasive species management in the country. To extend it to an international user base, there is certainly potential, but within the current agreement and form we cannot. Given interest, there is certainly some room and capacity to grow. It would then just be a requirement of funding and having the personnel there who can provide the service and help maintain these web scrapers. That is something I did not quite touch on in the discussion: web scrapers are dynamic pieces of code. Websites tend to update themselves and make changes and, as that happens, you have to adapt your web scrapers for that, so there is ongoing maintenance that is required by these things. However, can it be adapted? Certainly. Most of what we use, the technology we use, the systems we use, are open-source systems so it is something you can adapt through collaboration and set up something for your own jurisdiction.

Figure 6: Presentation by Jacob Maher entitled 'Monitoring internet trade for invasive alien species'.

Nikol Kmentová| Belgium | Challenges for detection of contaminants: the case of the New Zealand flatworm

- Flower pot trade is important in relation to the introduction of invasive species as contaminants, one of which the New Zealand flatworm.
- It is difficult to link certain species of plants with certain invaders or introductions and to get information on the core introduction pathways.
- New Zealand flatworm: area of origin is New Zealand, it is suggested that the flower plot trade was the pathway of introduction, but the source/which plant is not known. In Europe it is widely present in the British Isles (non-native distribution), where it has several impacts.
- The goals of the project were: 1) to propose a protocol to the authorities for the detection of the New Zealand flatworm at border controls and 2) to experimentally test this protocol.
- The project proposed to develop DNA-based barcoding for identification, as flatworms are not easy to identify morphologically, so DNA sequencing of other, genetically similar, flatworms is needed to be certain that the species found at borders are the banned species.
- The first task was to build the DNA sequence database by collecting samples and the second task was the experimental validation. The latter has two approaches:
    - Visual inspection: If you see a flatworm on a potted plant, you take a sample and identify it with PCR.
    - eDNA: If you cannot see flatworms on potted plants, you can use eDNA to detect if there are flatworms in the soil.
- eDNA does come with its problems, including contamination from the prey of flatworms, false positives, false negatives, and flatworm eggs are not detectable using eDNA.
- Future directions on this phytosanitary problem: do we go for species-specific protocols that detect one species (what was done here), or do we try developing more general protocols that could potentially detect more than one invasive species in, for example, one soil sample?

Rob Wakefield | United Kingdom | Inspections at the UK border – current situation and long term aims

- Overall aim is to reduce the threat of non-native species to Great Britain (GB). More specifically, the aim is to halve the number of non-native species establishments per year.
- 12 pathways of introduction have been identified in GB, four of which relate more to borders: 1) angling (people coming in and out of the country with their angling gear), 2) shipping containers, 3) horticulture (imports of plants as commodities), and 4) recreational boating.

- Current challenges:
    - Challenge 1: Lack of legal powers.
    - Challenge 2: Establishment of relationships with other agencies (e.g. border force).
    - Challenge 3: Improving awareness of invasive alien species legislation.
    - Challenge 4: Avoiding trade barriers.
    - Challenge 5: Physical access to shipping containers.
- The integration of the list of banned species into the Centre for International Trade software, that reads/checks the incoming phytosanitary certificates, allows for imports to be checked for these species. There are a couple success stories, e.g. there has been a few attempted imports of *Myriophyllum aquaticum* that were intercepted.
- Long term aims:
    - Acquire legal powers to stop vehicles.
    - Have border campaigns and speak to anglers/boaters to gain more compliance.
    - Data collected during pilot years to inform future decisions (risks analysis).
    - NNSI to be the first port of call for all border agencies who find IAS issues.

<u>Questions and Answers for Rob Wakefield</u>

- *Question:* I always took the UK as a country that actually deals quite well with invasive species and has been quite active with the secretariat and the biosecurity campaigns for the Asian hornets, etc. As such, I was surprised to see all the specific challenges that you listed, so I am curious do you have any idea why this area of work (border controls) has been dismissed in relation to invasive species? I am trying to understand why the rest would tick along quite well, but this area be left behind?
    - *Answer:* I think it is partly that it is a new organisation. Biosecurity in the UK has existed, plant health, and seeds inspection, have a long history but it is just a case of bringing in all the relevant bits of non-native species biosecurity into one organisation. It started with four people, so it has taken time to work with all these different organisations. Everyone one of them have been dealing with non-native species to an extent but pulling all that together, that is the reason why it has taken a couple years to get established and going from a team of four people to 17, that has also had its challenges as well.
- *Question:* How are you proving your worth to the UK government? You are clearly doing something right because you are getting bigger and bigger. What is the magic bit of information that you are collecting to pass on?

- *Answer:* I think the key thing here, the magic word, is statistics. All the inspections carried out by us are recorded. We are recording contamination rates to show that yes, there is a problem here, and previously no one has been dealing with it. That is the first thing, we have to prove that there is a problem. Secondly, we keep records of where we have had to put something right, where enforcement action has been taken, we then report that back. We have a yearly and quarterly report back to government where the secretariat will, on our behalf, report the results of what we have been doing. In terms of things like internet trade as well, we have someone monitoring the amount of work that we are doing, looking at people selling things online that they shouldn't be. We have got a clear drop in listings for invasive species over the last 12 months that we have been working on that, so some of the results have been quite clear, and that is probably what it is.

Riccardo Scalera | IUCN ISSG | Overview of the training material prepared for MS

- To respond to the Regulation requirements, specifically Article 15, several tasks were carried out by IUCN.
- The two tasks carried out in 2023 concerning Article 15 were:
  - Survey to MS: review findings from MS reports and a dedicated questionnaire to identify training programmes that could be developed in line with Art. 15(8).
  - Training and guidance materials: created for training staff on Art. 15.
- The training and guidance materials have four modules, which can be adapted to the specific target audience:
  - Introduction for the readers.
  - Invasive alien species, which mostly deals with terminology and is useful for an audience that is not fully familiar with the topic.
  - The EU Regulation on IAS, including the history of the regulation and the rationale.
  - Implementing Art. 15 of the Regulation, which is the most technical module and must be adapted to the expertise and experience of the speaker and audience.
- Other knowledge and information tools prepared by IUCN include a brochure explaining the EU IAS Regulation, a brochure with details on the 88 IAS of Union concern and a number of identification guides for several IAS of Union concern. All of these materials are available through the publications Office of the European Commission and the CIRCABC Repository, as well as in the IAS IUCN webpage here.

3.2. Afternoon session

3.2.1. Breakout groups

The afternoon session started with Ana Nunes (IUCN) providing an overview of the structure of the four breakout groups - red, blue, green, orange - to all participants within the plenary hall (see the two initial slides of Annex 2). Each of the four breakout groups was facilitated by IUCN, consisting of a moderator, one or two note-takers, and a range of 16-18 participants. Participants were pre-assigned to specific breakout groups, in an effort to ensure number and gender balance, to provide a mix of different types of authorities' representatives with varied expertise, and to guarantee a good representation of different MS in each group.

Once within their groups, the IUCN moderator explained to participants in further detail how the groups would run, showcasing their content and timing, by using a short presentation (Annex 2). Firstly, all participants were given the opportunity to introduce themselves in a brief tour de table (Figure 7). The moderator then reminded participants that, while the focus of discussions was on the application of the EU IAS Regulation, relevant examples from Plant and Animal Health and/or CITES, were also welcome. The moderator further reminded participants that the focus was on checks of commercial consignments of goods, plants and animals (not on passenger luggage or goods in transit).

Figure 7: Tour de table of all participants in one of the breakout groups.

This was followed by the presentation by the moderator of a short case study on confiscated goods in Belgium or the Netherlands, designed to spark initial discussions. Details on each of these case studies can be found in Annex 2. After the presentation of the case study, participants were invited to discuss it, by drawing parallels with their own case studies or simply by expressing thoughts on what had been presented. A particular question raised by the moderator was whether the response implemented by the responsible MS authorities to each particular situation/case study would have been the same or different in participants' own countries (Figure 8). Discussions held in this part of the breakout group were captured by note-takers in a free flow manner (i.e. not using a specific template).

Figure 8: Discussions held in one of the breakout groups.

Upon completion of the deliberations around the case studies presented, a general and longer discussion was held on the main challenges and needs regarding implementation of Article 15 (Figure 9). The discussion was structured into three main themes, namely (i) controls/checks of consignments of animals, plants and goods under CN codes, (ii) detection and identification of goods/species and (iii) confiscation of goods/species or other response action. The discussions on each theme were further broken down into 'challenges', 'needs' and 'what is working' for each of the respective themes. The cross-cutting topics 'Data management', 'Cooperation' and 'Networking' were showcased, as a reminder to participants of areas that might need addressing under each of the themes (Annex 2).

The note-taker(s) captured the points discussed by participants under each of the themes by entering all information into a Microsoft Word template (Table 2), which was displayed on a projector, so that all participants could see and agree to what was being registered. For each of the three main themes, the table contained one trigger question, to help participants better understand the specificities of the theme being discussed, as well as to help them think about potential challenges/needs for that respective theme. The raw information captured within each of the four breakout groups using the abovementioned template is available in Annex 3. In this Annex, the names of the MS pertaining to each participant making comments have been removed, which at times may read less clearly. A compilation and overview of the challenges and needs for each of the three themes, across all the four breakout groups, is presented in the subsection below.

Figure 9: Discussions held in two of the breakout groups.

Table 2: Template used to capture general discussions on the main challenges and needs regarding implementation of Article 15 within the breakout groups.

1. CONTROLS/CHECKS OF ANIMALS, PLANTS AND GOODS UNDER CN CODES		
Which tools/procedures are used and effective for deciding for what/from where to undertake documentary and physical checks of goods brought into the Union (e.g. intelligence reports, risk profiling)? Are these the same used to detect unintentional introductions?		
Challenges	Needs	What is working

2. DETECTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF GOODS/SPECIES		
Which tools/procedures are used and effective for detecting and identifying IAS of Union concern at entry points, and avoiding misidentification (e.g. ID guides for all species, external expertise, sniffer dogs, thermal imaging, e-DNA)?		
Challenges	Needs	What is working

3. CONFISCATION OF GOODS/SPECIES OR OTHER RESPONSE ACTION		
Which tools/procedures are used and effective to confiscate specimens/consignments in case of detection of IAS of Union concern (e.g. infrastructure for seized/confiscated specimens, enforcement, penalties, compliance with animal welfare rules)?		
Challenges	Needs	What is working

3.2.1.1. Main challenges and needs identified in all breakout groups

This section presents a compilation and summary of the challenges and needs identified across all the four breakout groups. This has been prepared according to the notes taken by the note-takers as shown to participants during the conference (and presented in Annex 3), and further interpretations by the facilitators of the breakout groups. This means that not all the points discussed will be featured below and the text will not reflect the exact wording used by the various MS representatives during the discussions.

A high number of commonalities were found between groups, for example regarding the need for more capacity/resources and the standard use of AI (under theme 1. Checks/controls); more awareness raising about IAS (under theme 2. Detection of species); more and better holding facilities, and the need to deal with animal welfare issues (under theme 3. Confiscation). Further details are presented below, where firstly the summarised main challenges across the three themes are presented, followed by the main needs. For both each of the challenges and needs, the main keywords pertaining to each of them have been highlighted in bold.

Challenges

1. CONTROLS/CHECKS OF ANIMALS, PLANTS AND GOODS UNDER CN CODES

- The **intra-EU movement of IAS** is covered under the scope of the EU regulation (art. 7. 1. d)) and some MS have specific protocols/tools to deal with this. This is **difficult to be apprehended** because of the EU Single market rules (free movement of goods). There are no controls of movements of animals and plants within the EU, except for Animal and Plants health controls as regulated under the Animal Health Law and the Plant Health Law.
- Due to the **high volume of declared goods entering countries**, customs controls are made on prior risk assessment where high-risk commodities are being checked. As a consequence, there is **no possibility to check all consignments**, nor information provided in detail.
- **IAS seem to not be the priority** of animal/plant health inspectors and customs agents, who need to check many other issues. This links to **not enough awareness on IAS** by animal/plant health inspectors and customs agents.
- It is challenging to **not have accurate information on what comes in**, which species are imported, and what is the frequency of pathways used.
- Post parcels and cargo are very difficult to check and to get access to, meaning this is only done randomly, with **little chance to intercept illegal movement of IAS**.
- **Unintentional imports** are often **not looked for actively**, so it is very hard to detect those.

- Usually, **live animals** are allowed to be **sent by post**, which depends on national legislation, but this is mostly regulated by the movement of vertebrates, and **not clear for invertebrates**.
- It is difficult to keep up with flows of goods, namely **changing points of entry** (transit vs. end destination), and possible **change of routes**.
- There is a very **high variety of organisms in trade**, and **no description or obligation of declarations** is required (for species other than those of Union concern).
- **Mislabelling** happens quite regularly and is a big issue.
- For most MS, not a lot of cases of confiscation exist so far, making it **difficult to acquire resources** for this process and causing **lack of knowledge** and information.
- **Personnel capacity is a huge challenge** - even with prioritisation exercises, the volume of imports can drown out the risk analysis.

2. DETECTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF GOODS/SPECIES

- **Staff at borders** and points of entry, who need to find and confirm the species found, are **not experts on identification of species**, and do **not have a clear idea of who to contact** for this.
- Sometimes **competencies are not clear**, i.e. if the consignment should be dealt with by animal health, plant health, environment or other authorities.
- **Time of action is crucial and a limiting factor**, e.g. it is difficult to have an expert on site within a reasonable time to identify the species.
- Knowledge/awareness of IAS is another limiting factor, along with **lack of appropriate resources**.
- Often the **status of goods makes it impossible to identify species** and look-alike species also pose challenges.
- **Molecular tools are mostly not available for customs officials**, and restricted to veterinarians and health officials, and there are issues pertaining to various aspects of the molecular analyses (e.g. lack of primers, lack of publicly available genetic sequences of the target species or congeners to ensure robust identification).
- **e-DNA can provide false positives** of species which are not present anymore in the goods at customs, and importers may challenge the results.
- **Lack of protocols for detecting contaminant species**, such as in fish consignments, flatworms in pots/soil, etc.

3. CONFISCATION OF GOODS/SPECIES OR OTHER RESPONSE ACTION

- There is a clear **lack of legislation for confiscation of unintentional transports of IAS** (e.g. not possible to remove a flatworm found in a plant pot not present on any pest list). The implementation of Art. 13 regarding the development of action plans for pathways of unintentional introduction, is difficult.
- At borders, **identification of species and timing are limiting factors** to make decisions, as well as animal welfare aspects.
- There is a **lack of facilities or physical space to keep animals/plants** while inspecting them or awaiting results. Moreover, often confiscated specimens need to be used for legal procedures, meaning they have to be kept alive until the (court) decision, which requires having enough and appropriate holding facilities.
- There are **difficulties at the decision-making level on the euthanasia** (and animal welfare) of confiscated specimens.

Needs

1. CONTROLS/CHECKS OF ANIMALS, PLANTS AND GOODS UNDER CN CODES

- **Increased knowledge exchange among MS** is needed, e.g. on daily practices, risks, interceptions.
- **More training and awareness** to support better checks at customs are required.
- **More resources**, including in terms of staff, are needed.
- **Scanner analyses, especially using AI**, are required for systematic use.
- **Accurate data on country-goods combinations** need to be carefully recorded, to allow for a proper risk analysis approach to checks of consignments. Pathway risk assessments are required to predict level of risk, depending on origin and goods-species.
- Having the **description of goods at the species level** is largely needed.
- **Documents need to be properly filled out, on a different tool** similar to TRACES, incorporating IAS. When used for queries, TRACES is limited to checks of the country of the searcher, so access to other countries would be useful.
- **Database/platform on global frequency of introduction pathways and illegal/ legal trade** (not only for species of Union concern, but all alien species).

2. DETECTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF GOODS/SPECIES

- **Identification guidance to support checks** needs to be developed and circulated.
- A register, or **reference list, of experts for identification of certain species**/groups is required.
- It is important to establish **agreements/contracts with eDNA laboratories**.
- There is the **need for a protocol, with a step-by-step approach, explaining the process** to follow for each species, e.g. to decide if a photo is useful, or if should go directly to eDNA tools. Protocols that allow for eDNA analysis and its timing are also needed.
- **Suspicious goods need to be consistently stopped**, which requires the existence of protocols, facilities, equipment, staff and a clear legal mandate.
- A **catalogue of DNA primers** for all IAS of Union concern, as well as detailed PCR protocols, are required.
- **Formal and effective collaboration** is required between customs, IAS, and plant/animal health authorities.

3. CONFISCATION OF GOODS/SPECIES OR OTHER RESPONSE ACTION

- **Animal welfare considerations** need to be addressed regarding confiscated animals (including invertebrates) and how to dispatch them.
- Develop and implement a **specific protocol to dispatch confiscated animals** (expertise, equipment, facilities, staff).
- **Good communication** between sanitary controls and customs controls for IAS is required.
- Establish **clear guidelines on what to do when an illegal or suspicious organism is found** while **in transit**.
- Create the **appropriate conditions to deal with packages that should,** but cannot **be, sent back to the country of origin**.
- **Expert certification for evidence verification** is needed to prevent objections in court. Also, a **database of judicial biodiversity experts** for specific groups or a system of forensic experts would be useful. Legal means for confiscations to allow time for identification would be required.
- **More holding facilities** are needed to store live animals, plants and goods.

3.2.2. Summary of the day

Upon completion of the breakout group discussions, participants reconvened in the plenary hall for an interactive Mentimeter exercise to synthesise the discussions of the day, led by the Chair Tim Adriaens and Kevin Smith from IUCN (Figure 10). A grand total of 42 participants actively engaged and responded to the Mentimeter exercise, although the number of respondents to each question slightly fluctuated. All Mentimeter questions and results are available in Annex 4.

Figure 10: Chair Tim Adriaens and Kevin Smith (IUCN) presenting the Mentimeter exercise during the 'Summary of the day' session.

To begin, participants were asked to respond to three questions, which results were projected live on the screen, so that all participants could see them right away and that they could be briefly discussed by the audience.

Question 1: What action at a NATIONAL level is needed the most to improve effectiveness of border controls for IAS in your country?

Question 2: What action at the EUROPEAN UNION level is needed the most to improve effectiveness of border controls for IAS in your country?

Question 3: What are the biggest obstacles to implementing effective border controls in your country?

There were various and varied responses to each of these three questions, all of which can be found in Annex 4. In what concerns Question 1, on the actions most needed at National level to improve effectiveness of border controls, some of the points commonly raised referred to the **need for increased awareness of IAS, education and training**. On Question 2 (needs at the EU level), the same needs as those mentioned in Question 1 were mentioned, but the most relevant ones referred to putting in place **a system or process for knowledge exchange between MS** (to allow sharing experiences, data, tools and best practices), as well as the **need for more cooperation and collaboration between MS** (which is clearly linked to the previous point) (Figure 11). Regarding Question 3, when looking at the biggest obstacles to implementing effective border controls, although many different obstacles were stated, by far the most mentioned one was the **lack of human resources**. **Difficulty in species identification** was also raised as an important obstacle, and **knowing which goods to perform checks on** was also mentioned. A more detailed account of the main areas put forward by participants for action at the National (Question 1) and EU level (Question 2), as well as the main obstacles to effective border controls (Question 3) are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Responses of participants to each of three questions on the needed actions to improve border controls and main obstacles to achieving it. Only the areas highlighted as relevant by a high number of participants (starting by the most relevant first) are shown below. Full responses to each question can be found in Annex 4.

Question	Main areas highlighted in responses
1 - What action at a NATIONAL level is needed the most to improve effectiveness of border controls for IAS in your country?	• More specific knowledge, training and education on IAS, as well as better training and ID tools • Improve collaboration and coordination between authorities, and promote data exchange • Create a dedicated IAS inspectorate and make it a priority at borders • Increase awareness on IAS and the EU IAS Regulation
2 - What action at the EUROPEAN UNION level is needed the most to improve effectiveness of border controls for IAS in your country?	• Set up a platform/working group for MS to share experiences and tools, to facilitate cooperation and knowledge exchange • Develop educational tools, guidelines and training on IAS

	• Create a list of EU experts available to help with species identification
3 - What are the biggest obstacles to implementing effective border controls in your country?	• Lack of human resources • Difficulty in species identification, especially at early stages (seeds, eggs, juveniles) • High volume of goods entering

Figure 11: Some of the participants responses to the question 'What action at the EUROPEAN UNION level is needed the most to improve effectiveness of border controls for IAS in your country?'.

Following from these questions, participants were asked to rate the following statement 'The people that I have met, and discussions that I have had, will be useful to my work', using a Likert scale. There was a five-point response scheme, ranging from 'Yes, strongly agree' to 'No, strongly disagree', and most participants responded 'Yes, agree', followed by 'Yes, strongly agree' (Figure 12; Annex 4).

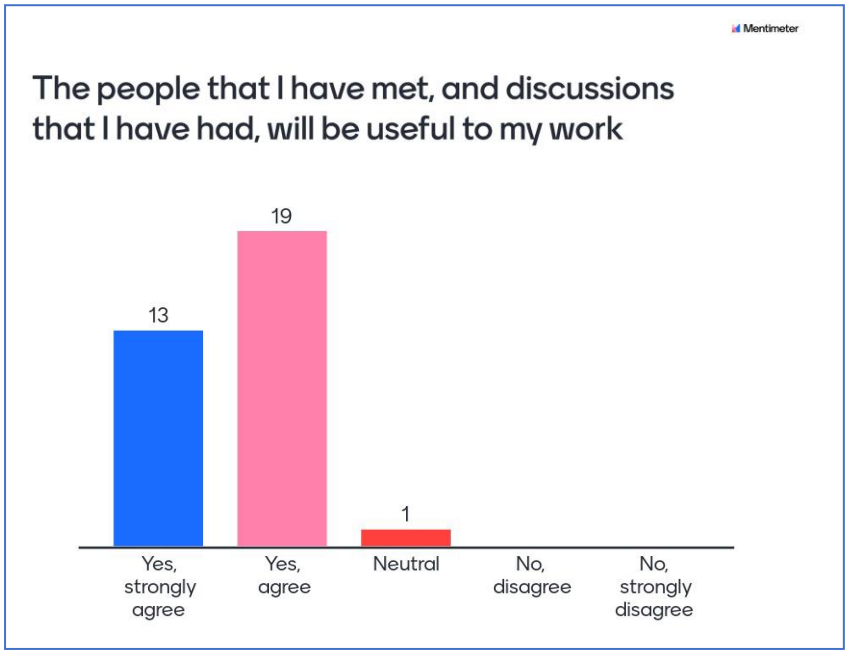

Figure 12: Perceptions of participants concerning the statement 'The people that I have met, and discussions that I have had, will be useful to my work'.

Participants were then asked to 'Think of a word to describe your biggest takeaway today', with responses presented as a Word Cloud. Perhaps not surprisingly, the words most suggested by participants were 'awareness', 'collaboration', 'knowledge' and 'identification', with other interesting ones such as 'image recognition' or 'species level', also remarked (Figure 13; Annex 4). Lastly, the Mentimeter presentation provided an option for participants to raise any additional questions or comments that they would like to see addressed. Six questions were asked by participants, the most upvoted one concerning what would follow from this conference (Figure 14). Representatives from the EC responded that this event was the beginning of a process to invest into Article 15 of the EU IAS Regulation, meaning that the topic will stay on the agenda, being now up to the EC and MS to discuss the next steps, and what the priorities are.

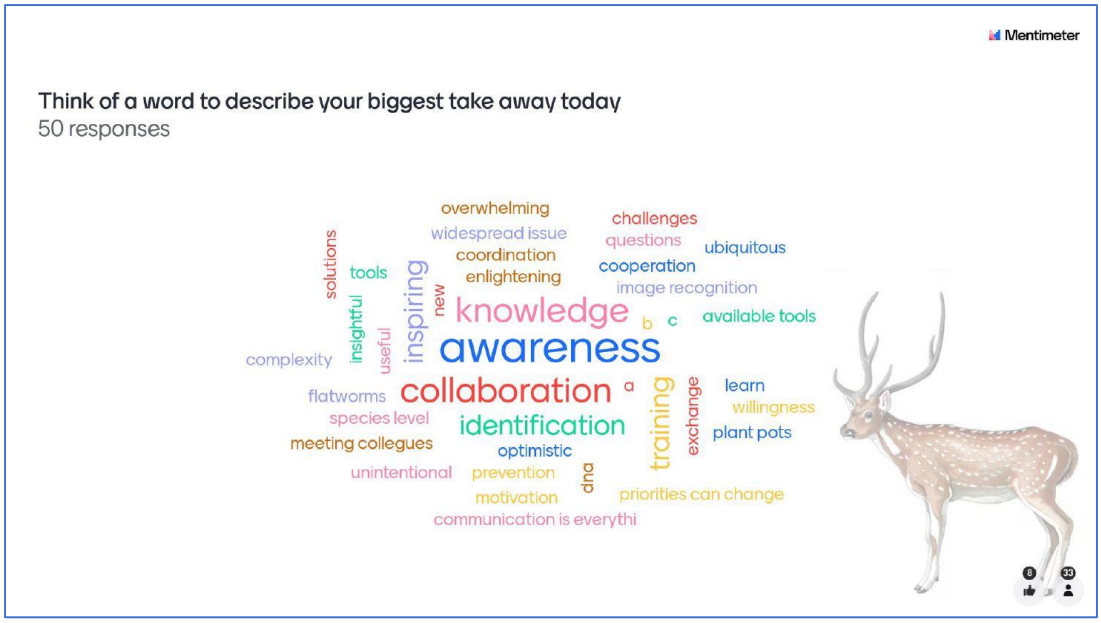

Figure 13: Word Cloud Mentimeter results when participants were asked to 'Think of a word to describe your biggest takeaway today'.

Question asked	Slide		
What's next after this meeting ?	Any additional questions or comments that you would like to raise?	;	7
Will you share the présentations and discussion sessions ?	Any additional questions or comments that you would like to raise?	;	6
any plans for awareness raising in general public?	Any additional questions or comments that you would like to raise?	;	4
Gettong slides?	Any additional questions or comments that you would like to raise?	;	2
When going for a positive list?	Any additional questions or comments that you would like to raise?	;	1
Planned follow up or next steps	Any additional questions or comments that you would like to raise?	;	1

Figure 14: Questions asked by participants through Mentimeter, and upvotes for each of those.

3.3. Closing remarks

Closing remarks for the conference were delivered by Hans Stielstra, Deputy Head of Unit for biodiversity, DG-ENV, EC.

4. Conference feedback survey

A conference feedback survey was circulated by the Belgian organising team soon after the conference taking place, with the goal of capturing views of participants regarding the event and asking for feedback for potential improvements. Many of the questions asked participants to rank a number of statements concerning different aspects of the conference, using a Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly disagree' (1) to 'Strongly agree' (5). A total of 33 participants responded to the survey, with an overall strongly positive feeling about the various aspects of the conference, shown by the majority of the statements rated as '4. Agree' and '5. Strongly agree' (Figure 15).

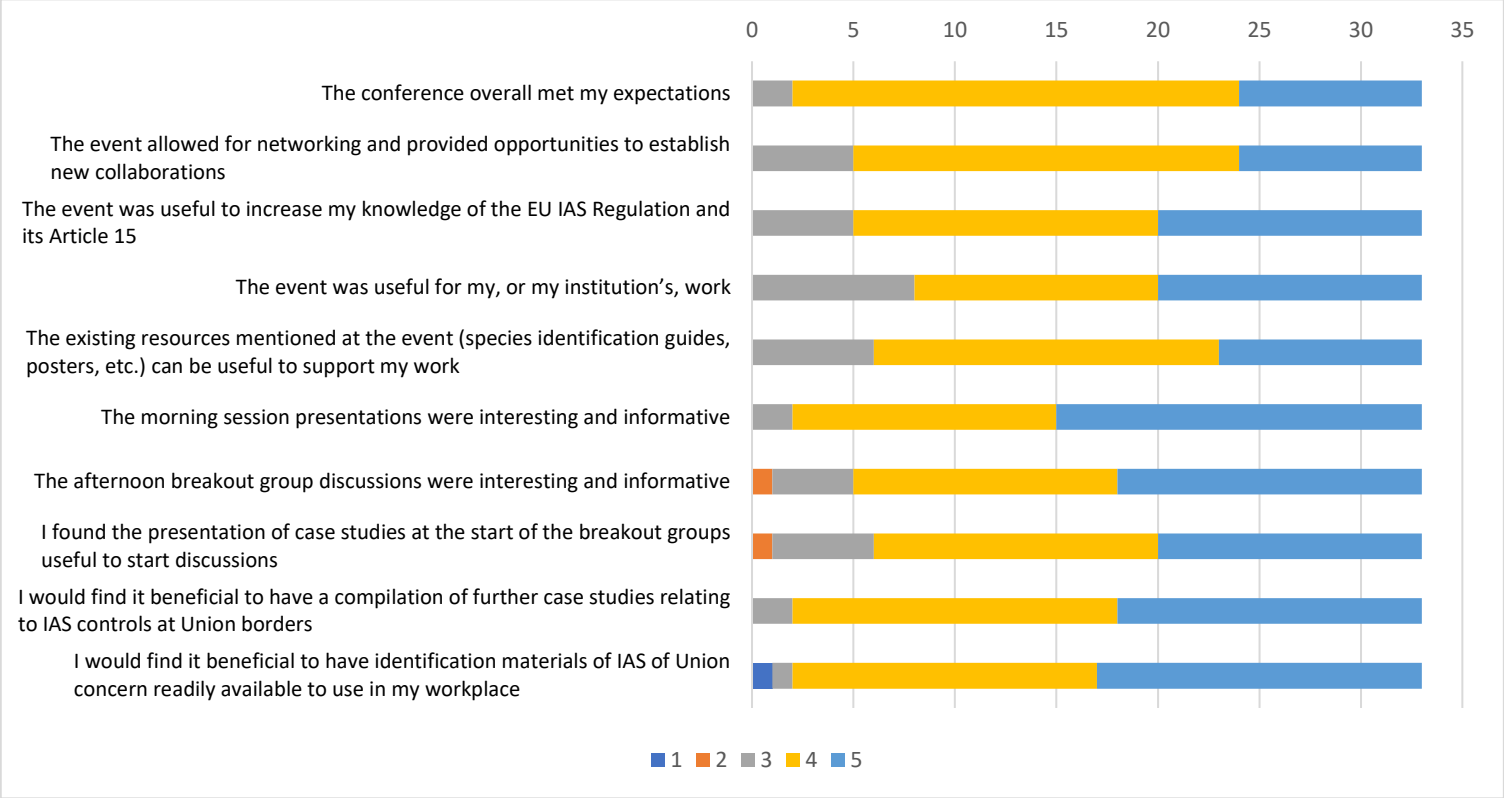

Figure 15: Rating by participants of ten different statements concerning the conference, for which feedback was asked by the organising team. 1. Strongly disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Neither agree nor disagree; 4. Agree; 5. Strongly agree.

A further question of the survey referred to the areas that could be improved for a possible future event, mainly in what concerns content and structure. The major area suggested for improvement concerned the materials provided, and other suggestions referred to having more time for breakout groups discussions, smaller breakout groups, and generally more time for participants to share experiences and to network (Figure 16).

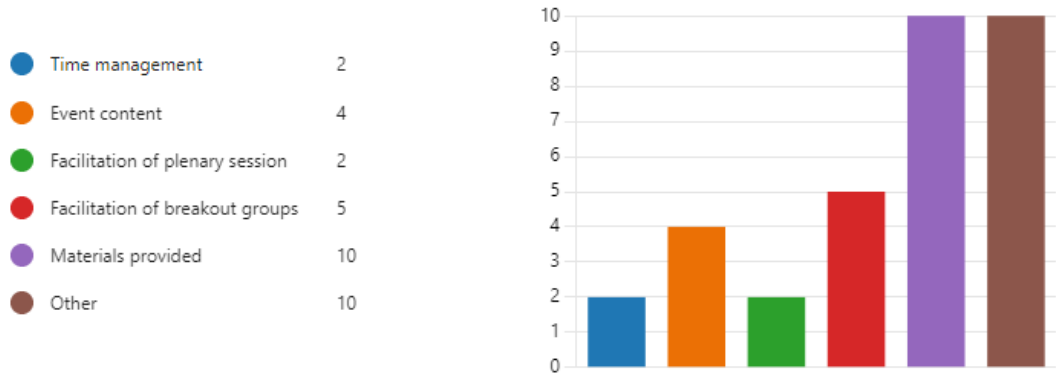

Figure 16: Participants suggestions on the areas that could be improved for a future meeting.

Finally, participants were asked about which action they would like to see happen at the EU level, in what concerns a better implementation of Article 15, following from the conference. The variety of responses is showcased in Table 4 below, and many of these align well both with the main 'Needs' presented in Section 3.2.1.1., as well as with the actions at the EU level highlighted by participants as needed during the Mentimeter session (shown in Table 3 and Annex 4).

Table 4: Responses of participants to the survey question 'Which action would you like to see on European level?'.

More collaboration
Mandatory species level identification in the customs declaration
More coordination for more efficiency: development of tools to avoid that every MS has to invest in the same things, sharing of information for faster (re)action. Imposed checks for IAS in TRACES
More harmonised and clear procedures for unintentional and contaminants with IAS import at the EU border
Possibility to exchange experiences and offer support between Member States authorities, like the one between CITES authorities with EU-Twix
Trainings
Campaign to raise awareness of IAS
App or papers with the species we are looking for and easier ways to detect them
It would be useful to have identification materials provided on an EU level, because at the moment it feels like every Member State is doing the same thing on its own
Science about nomenclature
One database with useful information for all Member States
Sharing the identification tools and action plans Have a look at the informal exchange via the (dark)web, as tested in Australia
The development of an internet site with useful information for all Member States, e.g. risk analyses, threats, interesting cases/findings, legislation, ...
Guidelines for implementation

Strengthened dialogue with official control authorities
A platform that enables the exchange of experiences on this topic as well as on other topics related to IAS would be great
Training for trainers, visits directly at border control
A user-friendly central hub for exchange of information and best practices
Financing for basic research about identification/detection/monitoring of IAS. Encouraging the science/policy interface
A proper interception database / more integration or at least exchange between controls for IAS and other regimes (plant health, CITES). OneHealth/OneBiosecurity perspective / addition of the Union List species in Species+ / potentially a simple app for species ID and for facilitation of procedures / a tool to communicate with other customs officers/experts in other countries / a pathway risk assessment mechanism for IAS / regular training events for border control officers
Create a European App to use on the field
Stimulate those involved in border control in all Member States to exchange experiences. How does control work in reality and not just on paper
More coordination, e.g. through EU customs data hub in the future
Awareness raising on benefits of increased cooperation and alignment among national authorities and MS across plant health, animal health, customs and IAS competent authorities

5. Main conclusions of the conference

Based on the discussions held in the breakout groups, and on the results of both the Mentimeter exercise and the feedback survey, it is clear that there are some areas which require more attention than others, regarding a better and more efficient implementation of Article 15 by the various MS. These are the following:

- **More coordination and collaboration between different MS**, which might be achieved through creating a EU-level central repository for sharing data and tools, and/or a EU-level IAS border enforcement working group.
- Centralise at **EU-level a repository of information on IAS checks**, documentation, trade pathways, confiscated items, etc. in NotSys or using another platform (with similar functionalities to TRACES and EU-Twix). This should ideally include information on all invasive alien species other than those of Union concern.
- **Training on IAS border controls at the EU level**, which can consist of training for trainers. There might not be a strict need for specific IAS identification training, but yet the need to create awareness of the EU IAS Regulation and IAS of Union concern.
- Currently existing **information should be more accessible to staff** and the **development of additional resources**, such as educational tools, posters or species identification Apps, would be very useful.

- A **specific defined procedure/ protocol for checks**, identification, confiscation and dispatch of IAS is required.
- Develop a **list of experts for the identification of different IAS taxa groups**, both at the national and EU level.
- **Improve the knowledge and awareness of IAS among importing companies and suppliers**, so that they limit the demand, as this should in turn lessen the supply chain.
- Improve the EU IAS Regulation to **provide more legal security and clarity to certain provisions, which will allow for more accurate and effective checks**.
- **Increase the human and financial resources available** for the various steps of border controls, namely prioritisation, checks, detection, identification and confiscation of goods and species.

5.1. Top priorities and follow up recommendations

Following from the above and the overall discussions held during the conference, five main priorities that could be recommended for most immediate action arise:

- Develop an IAS awareness raising campaign for border controls staff.
- Develop clear and well-disseminated Standard Operating Procedures for the best implementation of Article 15 at borders.
- Create an interceptions database to register information on all IAS consignments checked and confiscated, allowing for better future risk analysis and pathway management, as well as exchange of information between authorities and MS.
- Consider having descriptions of goods at species level (on top of CN codes), for which AI could then help screen the high volume of trade in order to search for, and detect, specific species.
- Consider the need for revisions of, or provide additional guidance on, Articles 13 and 15 of the EU IAS Regulation, in what concerns preventing unintentional introductions of IAS, including species not listed among those of Union concern.

Finally, some of the issues mentioned above might be addressed, to a certain extent, by the new EU centralised customs importing database, which is being developed with the aim to be functional by 2028. It will be fundamental for this framework to specifically consider and address IAS, in order for border controls to become as effective and efficient as possible.

6. Press Release

Following from the conference, a joint Press Release was issued by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, as well as by IUCN and the EC, in their websites. Social media posts in Twitter, Instagram and Facebook also accompanied this Press Release.

7. Annexes

Annex 1: Morning session presentations

Annex 2. Breakout groups_Presentation template

Annex 3. Breakout groups_Table challenges needs

Annex 4. Questions and results Mentimeter