

Introduction and Opening of the Meeting

Address of the Minister of Agriculture and Livestock to the Conference of the Global Initiative on Late Blight

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For Ecuador, it is a real honor to host such illustrious visitors. In this unique meeting, scientists and development agencies from around the world are convened to analyze the advances and perspectives in the fight against potato late blight, or “lancha”, as it is traditionally known in our country.

I would like to welcome the GILB group and its organizers, for establishing this event to pursue joint efforts in the search for solutions to a serious threat to the food security of millions of people around the world. Perhaps this articulation of efforts among the many organizations, programs and scientific disciplines that have come together in this conference is what has most caught my attention. In my opinion, this represents an innovative type of collaboration that can enormously strengthen the relationship and research with the national systems of agricultural research.

In Ecuador, the potato is a cultivar of strategic importance, with numerous publications that emphasize its historical relevance. With about 60,000 hectares planted in potatoes, the food security of thousands of rural mountain families fundamentally depends on this crop. But if we take into account the great number of business people and processors who depend on potatoes, this number rapidly reaches more than half a million. In agroclimatic terms, the productive potential of the potato is enormous. The distribution and quantity of rain, moderate temperatures and conditions of constant sunshine permit year-round production. But despite the serious efforts of the Autonomous National Institute of Agricultural Research (INIAP) and other organizations

that do research in the fields of technology, management and training, the yields continue to be the lowest on this continent.

Late blight represents a major limitation to potato cultivation. With the varieties that we currently have available, commercial cultivation is possible only with intensive application of fungicides. This is particularly so for cultivation of native varieties such as Uvilla, Bolona and Chaucha, which have traditionally been popular in the south of the country. Producers in the north, the region where yields are highest, spend \$120 on fungicides for each production cycle. This represents 10% of the total production cost. Even so, during the rainy season and even after 14 to 16 applications of fungicides, losses of 50% are reported. It is possible, then, to say that the sector currently spends 5 to 10 million dollars each production cycle on the use of fungicides. But these numbers represent only a portion of the costs incurred by late blight. The effects of pesticide use on human health in the form of allergies, neurological disorders, etc. are becoming clear and they are quite worrisome. The impact and cost of other externalities must still be studied. The amount of production loss caused by late blight is perhaps not large if one compares it to the 3 billion dollars that are estimated to be lost to this disease in the developing world as a whole, but these losses are significant for Ecuador in its current circumstances.

Research institutions have for some time reported the appearance of new fungal types in this country, confirming their ability to break varietal resistance, to tolerate Metalaxyl, to resist increased applications of fungicides, and to sexually reproduce in wild *Solanum*

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species. These characteristics comprise the nucleus of the problems to be analyzed at this conference.

For these reasons, we are concerned with the success of this conference and we support agricultural researchers in their crusade against late blight. The government is concerned with strengthening the institutions of sanitary control, such as the Agricultural Sanitation Service (SESA) and research institutions such as INIAP. We also offer our full support to agricultural extension services, so that innovations and solutions generated can be rapidly placed in the hands of the producers.

National institutions must interact closely, imitating at the local and regional levels the kind of interaction that this conference represents. Collaboration at all levels is essential. In this country, as in almost all the countries of this region, there exist many rural development agencies that serve as agricultural extension agents and provide a natural bridge for the

transfer of knowledge and technologies. Their participation, as much as that of researchers, is essential to secure success in the adoption process. National institutions must strengthen their relationships and interactions with related organizations in the region and in the world to become true partners in research and to support the transfer of knowledge and technology generated in other areas of the world.

Finally, I want to reiterate my sincerest congratulations to the organizers of this international conference, especially to the International Potato Center (CIP), which has coordinated the major part of this event. To the participants, I wish you much success in your efforts and future development. To all of you, we promise our support in the difficult task of stopping this disease for the benefit of many people in this country and in the world.

Thank you very much.