



Centre International de Hautes Etudes Agronomiques Méditerranéennes

CIHEAM BARI

c o m u n i c a t o s t a m p a

13 May 2025

**Towards a Sustainable Agricultural Future in the NENA Region
High-Level Conference at CIHEAM Bari in collaboration with FAO to
Support the Regional Plant Health Strategy**

The high-level conference on enhancing the Plant Health Strategy for the NENA Region (North Africa and the Near East), organised in close collaboration with the FAO and NEPPO (Near East Plant Protection Organization), concluded today at CIHEAM Bari. The event, held on May 12 and 13, brought together Ministers of Agriculture from Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Syria, and Yemen, as well as representatives from international and regional donors, technical institutions, and stakeholders from across the Region. The goal was to address one of the most pressing challenges facing the future of agriculture: transboundary plant pests and diseases (TPPD).

Discussions focused on advancing the regional strategy to combat TPPD, as outlined in the 2023 “Bari Declaration,” emphasizing capacity building, improved plant health practices, and transnational cooperation. Key expected outcomes include securing concrete financial commitments, establishing a regional technical cooperation network, and developing a shared operational roadmap.

Invasive pests pose a significant threat to food security, trade, and livelihoods. It is estimated that up to 40% of global crop production is lost each year due to plant pests and diseases, causing over \$220 billion in economic damage annually.

These losses are particularly severe in the Near East and North Africa region, which is already vulnerable to the impacts of conflict and the climate crisis.

Currently, North-West Africa is facing a desert locust invasion originating from the Sahel region. A single swarm can cover several hundred square kilometres, and one square kilometre of swarm may contain up to 80 million adult locusts. These pests can consume, in just one day, the same amount of food as 35,000 people.

The high-level participants in the conference sent a clear and powerful message: plant health is essential to ensuring food and nutritional security, promoting sustainable development, and strengthening resilience both in the NENA Region and globally.

FAO Director-General QU Dongyu emphasized that “*no country can face these challenges alone,*” adding that “*regional and global solidarity and cooperation are essential, partnerships are crucial, and funding is indispensable.*” He also highlighted

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that plant protection *“is fundamental to preserving biodiversity, which is vital for food diversity and for ensuring the right to food for all,”* reaffirming that *“the right to food is a fundamental human right.”*

In his address, the President of the Puglia Region, Michele Emiliano, underscored the strategic importance of CIHEAM Bari, describing it as *“a visionary asset for Puglia — a multinational hub that fosters dialogue, built on principles of harmony, peace, and a science-based approach to policymaking, particularly in the agricultural sector.”*

He added: *“We are proud to welcome everyone with intelligence and openness, because international cooperation is essential. Our region stands for freedom and hospitality — it does not draw lines between religions or cultures, but is curious, joyful, and proud to host and engage with diverse communities. This Centre embodies what we aspire to be as Puglia: a home for humanity, a place where everyone can feel welcome. Whoever comes to Puglia, for any reason, is at home.”*

Emiliano also highlighted Puglia’s pivotal role in managing the *Xylella fastidiosa* outbreak: *“We have the honour of hosting the FAO Director-General and discuss major plant health pandemics. Puglia’s experience is of global significance: we successfully implemented a large-scale monitoring system capable of overseeing millions of plants, using the same advanced techniques once applied for COVID testing. We’ve built an exceptionally valuable database, which we’re proud to share with CIHEAM Bari — so that it can become a model for all Mediterranean countries.”*

The director of CIHEAM Bari, Maurizio Raeli, recalled that *“in recent decades, the increasing globalisation of trade and ongoing climate change have contributed significantly to the introduction and spread of alien or emerging pests in our territories”*.

Drawing upon the experience of *Xylella* and other phytosanitary emergencies, Raeli emphasised that CIHEAM Bari, *“for almost forty years, has been playing a central role in training and strengthening the technical capacities of partner countries, particularly the NENA Region, thanks a Master of Science programme on Plant Protection, launched on the joint initiative of the Centre, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the University of Bari. To date, over a thousand experts in the field have been trained at CIHEAM Bari, thus confirming the strategic role that continuing education plays in the management of phytosanitary emergencies. Staff training and education are integral components of all technical cooperation projects within the phytosanitary sector. These endeavours are backed up by the enhancement of local laboratories and the assistance provided to adjust national legislative frameworks.”* He reiterated that *‘plant protection is not just a technical challenge, but a shared responsibility towards our future’*.

CIHEAM Bari will remain a key hub for technical and scientific cooperation in the NENA region, driving sustainable solutions, enhancing local capacities, and fostering dialogue among Mediterranean nations.

The shared commitment of NENA countries and international partners is paving the way for a more resilient, secure, and sustainable agricultural future—one where plant health is central to food security and environmental protection policies.

During the two-day event, participants also conducted a technical visit to areas of Puglia affected by *Xylella fastidiosa*, including a field assessment of olive groves in Brindisi

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province. The meeting served as a crucial platform for knowledge exchange, bringing together experts, farmers, and policymakers to share insights, experiences, and potential strategies for addressing the phytosanitary crisis.

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