

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

With nearly one year under his belt in the role as ISF secretary general, Michael Keller shares his perspective and provides an update on priority areas for the association. **Julie Deering**

DURING HIS FIRST year as secretary general of the International Seed Federation, Michael Keller has traveled extensively to meet with members and better understand their needs to align the organization of the secretariat and the work of ISF with members' priorities.

From his time in Africa, Asia, North America, Europe and South America, Keller says that one thing is clear: "Wherever I go, I come across well-organized national seed associations doing a great job for their members and promoting the seed sector."

Keller, who was formerly with DuPont where he started with Pioneer, says ISF has opened up a whole new world. "As former vice president of the French seed union, I was aware of the issues of the seed industry and the work of national associations but relatively unaware of the work done by the International Seed Federation."

Today, ISF represents 95 percent of the global seed industry and more than 7,000 companies. "As an international association representing members



At the helm of the International Seed Federation, Secretary General Michael Keller helps lead global conversations about innovation in plant breeding, seed applied technologies and the need for an international system of cooperation that protects breeders' plant innovations.



Members of the International Seed Federation's Breeders Committee met in March 2015 in Lausanne, Switzerland.

worldwide who have very different priorities, we understand the diversity of their needs and expectations,” Keller says.

He believes that, as the world shrinks and the global seed trade grows, countries actually have more issues in common than he originally thought.

“Times are changing and we have to move with the times,” he says. “The organization that achieved great things 50, 20 or even 10 years ago is not operating in the same environment as today.”

Today, ISF is focused on developing a five-year strategic plan for the organization. In doing so, staff and leaders have been asked to revisit the mission, vision and core values of ISF to increase their relevance in today’s environment. As part of this, Keller says his team is finalizing their strategic objectives, which will be linked to the work of ISF committees and sections and coordinated through the recently rolled-out action plans.

“We need to be clear — about where ISF is today, how it got here and where it is going, so that we adopt a joined approach at every level, both inside and outside, of the organization,” he says.

Clearly Communicate

This year, ISF launched a Working Group on Plant Breeding and Innovation to

ISF
represents:

95%
of the global seed industry

7,000+
companies

73
countries

\$10 billion
worth of international seed trade

develop a strategy for political outreach and communications. The working group, in collaboration with ISF’s communications manager, Jennifer Clowes, is working to develop messages targeting specific stakeholders as part of a campaign.

“We want to raise awareness of plant breeding and innovation at all levels and establish an ongoing dialogue with ISF’s key stakeholders who have varying levels of knowledge and influence,” Clowes says. “To ensure our messages have a global reach, we are engaging opinion leaders, such as regional and national heads of seed associations, and working with them to tailor ISF’s core messages to their region or country.”

Keller says that coordinating communications and creating the context for collaboration are central to the role of ISF’s new communications function.

In addition, the ISF team is working to communicate more about the benefits of seed applied technologies, with Technical Director Piero Sismondo at the helm.

“Plant breeders play an essential role in developing and releasing new varieties with improved tolerance or resistance to many threats that affect seedlings and young plants,” Sismondo says. “In spite of the range of modern tools and options currently being explored, a reliable defense against pests and diseases cannot be achieved through genetic improvement alone.

“The combination of high performance genetics and seed applied technologies is the most effective and sustainable solution that our industry has developed and is making available to farmers and growers.”

Inside ISF, the Seed Applied Technologies Committee (SAT-Com) is a group of experts who have been following the development of the technologies and the emergence of challenging situations worldwide. The SAT-Com is working to promote good stewardship practices, prepare technical guidelines and produce

tools to inform members. One of the most recent developments is the Post-Congress Workshop on Seed Applied Technologies that is being held in Kraków in May 2015 as part of the ISF World Seed Congress program.

Additionally, there's a great deal of effort being put forward in discussions pertaining to genetic resources.

Focus on Phyto

"Our job at ISF is to help companies get high-quality seed on the market," Keller says. "Radha Ranganathan has done great work moving the International Standard on Phytosanitary Measures (ISPM) specific to seed forward."

Describing the preparation of the international standard as "a lengthy procedure," Technical Director Radha Ranganathan who coordinates ISF activities in this regard, says ISF had contributed to the process in the form of a dozen or more papers that explained the workings of the seed industry and through the participation of an industry representative in the Expert Working Group drafting the standard. The first draft of the standard was opened to the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) Member Countries for consultation in June 2014 and attracted more than a 1,000 comments.

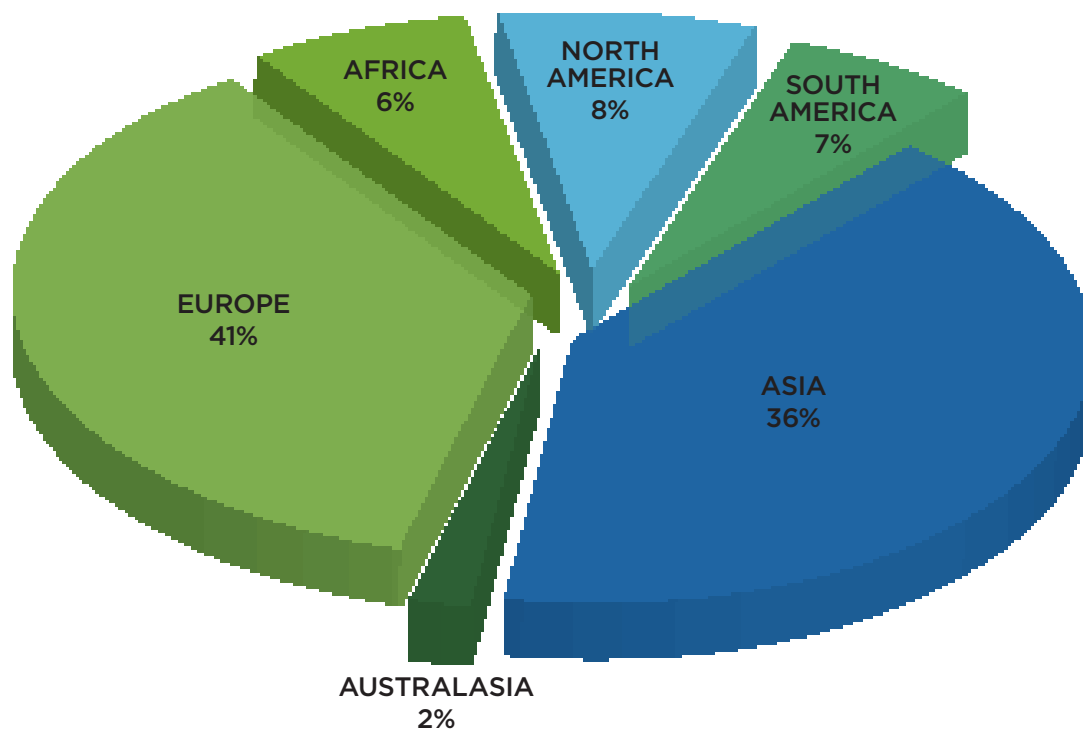
A revised version that takes these comments into consideration is being prepared, which will also undergo close scrutiny before being approved for adoption by IPPC's contracting parties.

"We hope the standard will be adopted in 2016, but it could take longer," Ranganathan says. "Harmonization of phytosanitary regulations is very important for the seed industry, and we are here to help in the process of finalizing, adopting and implementing the international standard on seed."

Navigate Plant Breeders' Rights

With respect to plant breeders' rights (PBR), Keller reports that the ISF

INTERNATIONAL SEED FEDERATION 2015 MEMBERSHIP



leadership team is facilitating discussion, which plays an important role in protecting PBR and stimulating innovation — a prerequisite to overcoming the challenges we face such as food security.

Keller says that a new model, referred to as an International System of Cooperation (ISC), has been presented by industry and UPOV. In addition to receiving support from ISF, the proposed system of cooperation is also endorsed by CropLife International and the International Community of Breeders of Asexually Reproduced Ornamental and Fruit Varieties.

"The industry is changing and so is the exchange of seed," Keller says. As an example, he explains that tomato seed might move through three continents and five countries before being sold to a consumer. As it stands, Keller says a breeder would have to apply for protection in all five countries with different filing requirements and timelines.

"We are working to find a way that allows member countries to better coordinate their efforts; therefore, reducing the administrative burden so there's mutual recognition of plant breeders' rights, and one would not need to apply everywhere," Keller says.

Such an International System of Cooperation would streamline application filing and processing; avoid duplication and inconsistencies; be easier and less time consuming for applicants; reduce time and costs for breeders in preparing and filing applications; and result in clarification of novelty.

Additionally, Keller explains that an International System of Cooperation with a simpler, more cost-effective process would also incentivize more breeders in more countries to apply for and obtain plant variety protections, thus increasing the overall number of PBR applications.

Ultimately, he says, such a system of cooperation should encourage companies and breeders to increase their investment in plant breeding and variety development.

"We are very excited to see this issue on UPOV's agenda," Keller says. Formal discussions are set to resume in October at the UPOV Consultative Committee meeting.

Keller says there has never been a better time to serve as secretary general of ISF.

"We are at a time when we are ready to engage in dialogue on the key issues, we have an agenda packed with interesting topics, and we have the will to turn challenges into opportunities," he says. **SW**