

For more information, please contact:

Megan Dold: +1 301 280 5720 or mdold@burnesscommunications.com
Jeff Haskins: +254 729 871 422 or jhaskins@burnesscommunications.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Editor's note: For updates on Pavlovsk Station and other news, follow us on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/croptrust>. Photos of Pavlovsk Station can be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/croptrust>.

International Scientific Community Calls on Russian President To Halt Destruction of Pavlovsk Station – the Russian Plant Collection Critical to World

Amid Mounting Pressure from Scientists, Russian Housing Development Foundation Postpones Sale of Pavlovsk Site, Forms Independent Commission to Evaluate Situation

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA (9 September 2010)—Momentum behind a global effort to save Europe's most important collection of fruits and berries reached a new level this week, as the Russian Housing Development Foundation (RZhS) postponed the sale of the Pavlovsk Experimental Station and announced the formation of an independent international commission to evaluate the presence of unique plant specimens housed there.

This major development comes on the heels of the mounting pressure from some of the world's most distinguished scientists, who have written letters personally calling on Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to overturn a court decision allowing RZhS to auction off the land for the construction of luxury apartments.

The DIVERSITAS scientific programme, an international network of the world's leading biodiversity scientists, under the auspices of ICSU (International Council for Science) and UNESCO, sent a letter to the President signed by its Chair and Executive Director on behalf of its thousands of members. The US Committee of DIVERSITAS, hosted by the National Academy of Sciences, sent its own letter, signed by twelve of the world's leading scientists. The International Society for Horticultural Science, the world's leading independent organization of horticultural scientists, representing members in some 150 countries, wrote a letter on behalf of the 3,600 participants of the 28th International Horticultural Congress. A letter was also sent to the President by six prominent botanists from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Bioversity International and the United Nations Environment Programme have all weighed in. (Scientists' names listed in separate section below.)

"The more than 6,000 varieties of fruits, berries, grasses, and grains are the lasting legacy of a collection effort made painstakingly over the course of 80 years that has survived wars, famines, and droughts to remain where it stands today: 90 percent of the varieties at Pavlovsk no longer exist anywhere in the world outside of the station's grounds," states one letter.

"Maintained and governed under Russian sovereignty, the collections at Pavlovsk are a global heritage that you have sheltered for over a century," states another letter. "We were gratified to learn of your personal interest in this issue and urge you in the strongest possible terms to renew your nation's commitment to protect this genetic treasure on behalf of the world's peoples."

On 31 August, the Pavlovsk Experimental Station received an unscheduled visit for an accounting audit by representatives from the Russian Public Chamber, Accounts Chamber, and the RZhS. In a statement, the N.I. Vavilov Research Institute of Plant Industry reported that the inspection “was a result of instruction given by Dmitry Medvedev for this situation to be scrutinized. After visiting two plots the commission was convinced that, indeed, the disputed plots harbor plants that make a part of the Vavilov collection of plant genetic resources. As a result of field inspection...representatives of the RZhS Fund stated they will postpone an auction for an uncertain period.” On 7 September, Russian news outlets reported that the postponement will last until the end of October. The Russian Accounts Chamber will visit the station for another inspection on 15 September.

Letters urged the president to preserve the Pavlovsk collection and “honor the legacy...of the 12 scientists who oversaw Pavlovsk during the Siege of Leningrad and made the ultimate sacrifice to protect the collection.”

“Without such collections, the possibilities for advanced plant breeding are restricted, and our capacity to adapt to the rapid environmental changes caused by globalization and climate change is greatly reduced,” said another letter.

Economic Value

Rejecting the Kafkaesque logic of developers who attempted to conclude that the “priceless” nature of the collections meant they were “worthless,” the letters emphasize the concrete economic risks of destroying unique genetic resources and the economic importance of the collection which contains 1,000 varieties of strawberries from over 40 different countries, most of which are found nowhere else in the world.

The scientists pointed out that there is already strong evidence that land suitable for strawberry cultivation will decrease as global winter temperatures continue to rise, and the Russian varieties from this station are exceptionally hardy and disease-resistant. Similarly, Russia is the world’s leading producer of black currants, a crop with a US\$430 million/year profit. 60% of the varieties grown in Russia were bred at the Pavlovsk station. Currants represent only 900 of the thousands of valuable fruits and berries stored at Pavlovsk.

“It’s not often that the global scientific community comes together in this way,” said Cary Fowler, Executive Director of the Global Crop Diversity Trust. “We are not politicians; we are scientists best placed to recognize the urgent importance of saving Pavlovsk Station. We’re going to keep up the effort to save this botanical treasure. And the news about the international commission is an extremely positive development. It provides transparency to the process and ensures that decisions about the fate of the collection will be made with solid scientific input.”

Names of Scientists

The DIVERSITAS letter has been signed by Peter Crane, Chair, Yale University; Rodolfo Dirzo, Stanford University; Michael Donoghue, Yale University; Ann Kinzig, Arizona State University; Thomas Lovejoy, Heinz Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment; Harold Mooney, Stanford University; Lynne Parenti, National Museum of Natural History Smithsonian Institution; Stephen Polasky, University of Minnesota, St. Paul; Cristián Samper, Director, National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution; Jorge Soberón, University of Kansas; James Tiedje, Michigan State University; and Margaret Collins, National Academies.

The University of Wisconsin letter was signed by Eve Emshwiller, Linda E. Gaham, Ken Cameron, Bret Larget, Tim Allen, and David Baum.

Evolution of the Campaign to Save Pavlovsk

The 7 September announcement that RZhS is forming an independent commission is the latest in a series of hopeful developments since the international campaign to save Pavlovsk Station began over a month ago.

The social media campaign started in mid-July with an appeal on the Huffington Post by Global Crop Diversity Trust Executive Director Cary Fowler entitled “Tweet Medvedev: Stop the Destruction of the Future of Food!” The piece encouraged supporters to send Twitter messages to President Medvedev about the Pavlovsk site in both Russian and English.

The online campaign quickly gained momentum following an 11 August ruling that real estate developers could go ahead with their plans to destroy the station. Propelled by an international coalition of grassroots groups, biodiversity advocates and concerned citizens, a set of online petitions grew from just 1,000 signatures to over 36,000 in two weeks. The President’s official response came via Twitter on 13 August, indicating that he had ordered the issue “to be scrutinized.”

Last week a Russian news outlet published a statement by an influential Russian politician, Sergei Mironov, the Speaker of the Russian Federation Council and a key Putin ally, in which he supports preserving the land at Pavlovsk.

Background on Pavlovsk

The Pavlovsk Experimental Station was established in 1926 by Nikolai Vavilov, the man credited with creating the concept of seed banks as repositories of crop diversity that could be used to breed new varieties in response to threats to food production.

During the Siege of Leningrad in World War II, 12 Russian scientists starved to death while protecting the diversity amassed by Vavilov, even though the seeds of rice, peas, corn, and wheat that they were protecting could have easily sustained them.

Vavilov himself was persecuted for his views on plant genetics and died of malnutrition in prison in 1943. But Russia later renounced his treatment and has since treated Vavilov as a hero. Today, the N.I. Vavilov Research Institute of Plant Industry, which operates Pavlovsk Station, remains one of the world’s most important conservers of crop diversity.

Pavlovsk Station is a key part of Vavilov’s legacy to Russia and the world. The field bank was built up initially by collecting local varieties from around European Russia, Siberia and the Far East, as well as accessions collected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by plant scientists and botanists. After World War II, Pavlovsk Station continued efforts to collect unique crop diversity from all over the world, including samples of apple trees from 35 countries; strawberry from 40 countries; black currant from 30 countries; plum and cherry plum from 12 countries; and honeysuckle from Russia and Canada.

Today, the hundreds of hectares of fields at Pavlovsk Station contain more than 5,000 varieties. Its crop collections are thought to possess a host of traits that could be crucial to maintaining productive fruit harvests in many parts of the world as climate change and a rising tide of disease, pests, and drought weaken the varieties farmers are now growing.

###

The mission of the **Global Crop Diversity Trust** is to ensure the conservation and availability of crop diversity for food security worldwide. Although crop diversity is fundamental to fighting hunger and to the very future of agriculture, funding is unreliable and diversity is being lost. The Trust is the only organization working worldwide to solve this problem. For further information, please visit: <http://www.croptrust.org>