



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



## Standing Group of Experts on Rabies in Europe under the GF-TADs umbrella

4<sup>th</sup> meeting (SGE RAB4)  
Teleconference, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2022

### Draft Report

#### Summary

On world zoonoses day, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022, members of the SGE on Rabies remembered that on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1885, Louis Pasteur successfully administered the first doses of rabies vaccines to a 9-year-old child that had been bitten by a rabid dog.

Ever since, the fight against rabies has worked on both human and animal sides of the disease, and members met for the fourth Standing Group of experts on rabies in Southeast Europe – a sign that against rabies, the struggle can and will be successful.

Although the meeting was planned to take place in a face-to-face format, it had to be organized online once more. Thus, the fourth meeting of the GF-TADs Standing Group of Experts on Rabies (SGE RAB-4) was held as a virtual meeting with over 37 participants present from 16 countries and 5 organizations. Member Countries provided reports on their epidemiological situation, activities, and plans in terms of oral vaccination against rabies, including some seasons without oral rabies vaccination campaigns.

Two experts were invited by the presidency to present the outcome of the project on animal disease eradication in the Western Balkans. They concluded that coordination between veterinary authorities on actions coupling oral vaccination campaigns and sufficient passive surveillance, were essential to rabies eradication.

Funding and procurement questions were discussed since they have a major impact on the positions of several countries. The Presidency specified that, although current funding sources would not be available soon, other co-financing mechanisms could be considered.

During the recommendations, a specific mention was made of the need to adapt surveillance to the situation in and around Ukraine to be able to follow up developments of the specific situation.

It was agreed to hold the next meeting mid-2023, preferably in person to allow Members to further engage.

Participants	
Members	
Albania	Keti MARGARITI
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Aleksandar NEMET

Bulgaria	Daniel PAVLOV
Croatia	Ivana LOHMAN
Greece	Sofia BOYTSINI
Hungary	Bence GYURO
Kosovo*	Bafti MURATI
Moldova	Maxim SIRBU
Montenegro	Vesna DAKOVIC Vladimir DJAKOVIC Mevlida HRAPOVIC Milan ROGOSIC
North Macedonia	Vanja KONDRATENKO Svetlana MICKOVA
Romania	Cristian SIPOSEAN
Serbia	Boban DURIC
Slovakia	Erika PAPIERNIKOVA
Slovenia	Jedrt MAURER WERNIG
<b>Non member countries</b>	
Poland	Sylwia KIELCZYKOWSKA; Krzysztof JAZDZEWSKI
Moldova	Cristina SIRBU
<b>Other participants</b>	
European Commission	Bernard VAN GOETHEM Alexis LOEBER Paddy MAC ENEANY Thierry CHALUS
OIE RR Moscow	Budimir PLAVSIC Marina SOKOLOVA Arsenty POLYAKOV Jean PERCHET
OIE SRR Brussels	Estelle HAMELIN Paolo DALLA VILLA Tomasz GRUDNIK
FAO	Eran RAIZMAN
ANSES	Florence CLIQUET
Agriconsulting	Tony KIRANDJISKI

## Opening Remarks

Dr Plavsic opened the meeting by reminding the participants of the very symbolic nature of the date chosen for the meeting which celebrates both the World Zoonoses day and the day in 1885 when Louis Pasteur successfully administered the first doses of rabies vaccines to a 9-year-old child that had been bitten by a rabid dog. Then, he passed the floor to the President of the GFTADs for Europe.

Dr Van Goethem, President of the GFTADs Regional Steering committee for Europe, welcomed the participants and after few opening remarks, presented the objectives of the meeting. Dr Van Goethem then presented the agenda. No additions were requested.

In his opening remarks, Dr Van Goethem stressed that rabies eradication is a priority for Europe. The EU experience in Western Europe shows that it is feasible to eradicate rabies, if Oral Rabies Vaccination campaigns associated with robust surveillance are implemented consistently. Actions must be taken in a proper coordinated way to eradicate rabies in wildlife. In the last years there was a large decrease in cases, but it is towards the end of the process that eradication becomes

difficult. It is therefore necessary to safeguard and consolidate the achievements on rabies control accomplished so far by the combined efforts of all countries/territories in the region. Dr Van Goethem also stressed that efforts need to be done correctly in border areas, as this was the case between France and Germany where lingering cases in the border area were only resolved through increased cooperation between both countries.

Dr Van Goethem reminded participants that the group was created to ensure greater coordination and cooperation between countries when performing vaccination campaigns as part of their rabies eradication programmes, and particularly along borders, to finalize and consolidate previous efforts.

In total, 37 participants attended the meeting representing all the SGE members, and relevant international bodies (EC, FAO and the OIE regional office). The Presidency had also invited two experts from the Animal Disease Eradication in the Western Balkans (ADEWB) project to give presentations, and three additional countries as observers (Poland, Moldova and Ukraine), who are in close geographical proximity to the South East Europe region and are also affected by rabies.

Dr Plavsic (SGE Secretariat) also welcomed Members and participants, including invited speakers from EU funded project, and looked forward to hearing presentations from countries.

## Conclusions of the Western Balkans Project

Drs Cliquet and Kiranjiski gave a presentation on the outcome of the ADEWB project and its specific component on rabies. They confirmed that:

- The regional laboratories have the capacities to confirm rabies infection. Some do have stronger capacities and can perform viral isolation and PCR techniques. They have good formal and informal communication and can support each other.
- A SOP for sampling was prepared to help in making sampling more reliable
- A regional strategy was prepared by Dr Cliquet.
- The regional cooperation was strengthened.

Dr Cliquet recalled that the last case in the WB was in 2020. She also added that in 2022, all countries except Serbia continued ORV while in 2023, vaccination should continue in a certain number of countries.

During the last year, she regretted that passive surveillance, despite being officially a recommendation in 2021, was still insufficient. In order to be efficient, sample size for passive surveillance should be multiplied by 12 to 14 to what is currently done in the western Balkans as a whole. It is essential to be able to truly confirm the rabies situation and know if the disease is either eliminated, or it is not. As soon as the passive surveillance would be carried out properly, it would be possible to finalize eradication in four years.

A regional approach emphasizing surveillance and ORV programmes with harmonized principles and methods, is essential to defeating the disease.

Dr Van Goethem thanked the two experts for their input and concluded that awareness, close collaboration for ORV in border areas, proper surveillance and global coordination are essential ingredients for eradicating rabies from this region. He considered that this project was on the right track.

Dr Van Goethem gave then the floor to Mr Alexis Loeber from the European Commission Directorate General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. Mr Loeber reiterated the importance of such meetings and the efforts made by the Commission to support rabies eradication in the region. He asked countries to take over the ownership of the programme and its financing by national budgets from next year.

## Updates from the member countries of the SGE RAB3

At the invitation of Dr Van Goethem, Countries presented the state of their situation from north to south, starting with Poland. Presentations will be made available on the website.

The following highlights should be noted:

- Poland had two cases in pets, and 30 cases in wildlife identified since the beginning of the year. ORV areas were extended in 2022 to follow the evolution of the epidemiological situation. Specific measures were taken to facilitate the entry of pets accompanying the flow of refugees fleeing Ukraine, with more than 40000 animals chipped and vaccinated since February.
- In Slovakia, vaccination is ongoing along the zones bordering Poland and Ukraine, coupled with robust passive surveillance. Specific conditions are in place for the entry of pets from Ukraine.
- Hungary focuses its vaccination efforts on the Eastern border areas. Flexibility measures are implemented for non-commercial movements of pets from Ukraine.
- Romania had difficulties securing funding for vaccination in 2021. They will focus their efforts on surveillance, especially passive surveillance to identify areas with positive cases. They plan to resume vaccination in autumn 2022.
- Moldova continues to carry out vaccination in the part of the country bordering Romania. Good cooperation with Romania helps Moldova manage issues such as pets traveling with refugees.
- Slovenia performed regular ORV until 2019. Since 2020, they made specific arrangements for emergency ORV only with both vaccine manufacturer and service provider. They carry out passive surveillance only. Specific measures are implemented to facilitate the entry of pet animals from Ukraine.
- Croatia had no major news and adapted their entry measures to the international situation following the EU recommendations; passive and active surveillance is ongoing. Vaccination is also ongoing on their entire territory (Adriatic islands excluded).
- Bosnia and Herzegovina noted a continuing problem with passive surveillance and autumn vaccination campaign might be skipped due to funding issues. No particular issues with pets coming from Ukraine.
- Serbia had their last ORV campaign in Autumn 2021 and faced again administrative issues to fund ORV in 2022. They increased active surveillance. They do not know what future vaccination they will be doing. However, they have planned vaccination in spring and autumn 2023 if funding is available.
- Kosovo\* - no major evolution, vaccination is carried out in the whole country. They plan to continue in spring 2023 but foresee difficulties in autumn 2023 if no EU funding is available. They carry out weak passive surveillance but no active surveillance.
- Bulgaria is continuing vaccination in the border areas although they missed both campaigns in 2021 and spring campaign in 2022 due to administrative issues with public procurement; surveillance activities are ongoing. Entry procedures are simplified for Ukrainian refugees with pets, with a declaration for traceability and mandatory vaccination.
- North Macedonia has ongoing vaccination and surveillance but wish to stop vaccination in 2024. They have a simplified procedure for receiving pets with refugees, including identification and vaccination of the animals that do not respect these conditions.
- Montenegro has an ongoing surveillance (mostly active) and continuing vaccination (2021 excepted), pets from Ukraine are subjected to the same kind of mechanism.
- Albania has continued vaccination although they missed some vaccination campaigns (2019, spring 2020 and spring 2022). Vaccination monitoring has been carried out after all campaigns. They do not carry out any passive surveillance.
- Greece – They reduced vaccination to border areas. They carried out vaccination regularly except in 2021. Adequate passive surveillance.

Dr Van Goethem thanked participants for their input and transparency and suggested that discussions be held during the second part of the meeting.

## **Discussion: vaccination, post vaccination monitoring, sustainability**

Dr Van Goethem opened the floor to comments from participants, first inviting the 6 CVOs participating in the ADEWB project to react on how they felt about the CVO meetings.

Dr Dakovic thanked the Commission for funding the ADEWB project and for funding ORV activities. She explained that the support received from the EU commission was very important. She wanted to make a parallel with Lumpy Skin Disease. She realized that the success in the fight against LSD was possible due to the unified approach. For rabies, this is not the case, and it is difficult to ensure complete success. It is important to have a discussion on the way forward now.

Mr Kirandjiski also thanked the OIE for its help.

Dr Chalus thanked colleagues for the comprehensive presentations and agreed that more coordination was needed. Real eradication inside the EU was mostly made possible thanks to the coordination of all efforts. He indicated that co-financing of eradication programs could be possible from 2023. Although funding from IPA will not be possible anymore, the EU will continue making efforts to support its neighbours.

Passive surveillance is currently too weak to allow cessation of vaccination. Efforts made in active surveillance are important, but passive surveillance is an important tool to prove disease free status.

Serbia and North Macedonia have improved their passive surveillance and Dr Chalus wanted to know more the means they used to achieve these results.

Dr Kondratenko explained that the relative success of North Macedonia was due to the incentives and constant awareness work with stakeholders.

In Serbia, passive surveillance is being increased in an effort to accompany the cessation of vaccination. Passive surveillance numbers will need to go up again despite the emergencies in ASF.

Dr Van Goethem informed the group that the Commission will organize a meeting in the autumn in Brussels with the WB countries to explain the co-financing procedures of eradication programmes.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The SGE RAB secretariat presented the draft recommendations to be discussed. The Secretariat of the GF-TADs will circulate these draft recommendations and participants will be invited to reply before July 13<sup>th</sup> COB.

## **Closing remarks - Future steps**

The SGE RAB will meet again approximately by mid-2023 with the same focus. An extra meeting will be organised with WB countries on funding availability. At the end of the day, the responsibility for stopping ORV will remain with individual countries, but coordination and communication are key to ensure that such phasing out is carefully assessed and considered in a regional perspective.

NB: all presentations of the SGE RAB4 are available on the webpage of the dedicated to Rabies.