



GF-TADs

GLOBAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE
PROGRESSIVE CONTROL OF
TRANSBOUNDARY ANIMAL DISEASES



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



World Organisation
for Animal Health
Founded as OIE

Standing Group of Experts on Rabies in Europe
under the GF-TADs umbrella
5th meeting (SGE RAB4)
Teleconference, 4th July 2023

Draft Report

Summary

On the 4th of July 2023, members of the SGE on Rabies attended the fifth Standing Group of Experts on Rabies. Although the meeting was planned to take place in a face-to-face format, it had to be organized online once more. Thus, the fifth meeting of the GF-TADs Standing Group of Experts on Rabies (SGE RAB-5) was held as a virtual meeting with over 40 participants present from 14 countries and 3 international organizations. Member Countries provided reports on their epidemiological situation, activities, and plans in terms of oral vaccination against Rabies.

Two experts were invited by the presidency to present the follow up project on animal disease eradication in the Western Balkans (WB) and some work of the EU Rabies Reference Laboratory for Rabies.

It was particularly pointed out 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 also discussed since they have a major impact on the positions of several countries. In the course of the meeting, the consequences of the situation in and around Ukraine on Rabies in wildlife were discussed; along with the efforts underway to address the situation.

It was agreed to hold the next meeting mid-June 2024, preferably in person to allow Members and partners to further engage.

Participants	
Members	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Aleksandar Nemet
Croatia	Ivana Lohman
Greece	Ilektra Fragkou
Hungary	Tibor Dr. Lückl Tamás Lancsák Bence Gyuro

	Lazar Marton
Moldova	Oxana Popa
Montenegro	Milan Rogosic Suncica Boljevic
North Macedonia	Vanja Kondratenko Milenko Simovikj
Romania	Cristian Siposean
Serbia	Boban Duric Tatjana Labus
Slovakia	Martin Chudý Erika Papiernikova
Slovenia	Jedrt Maurer Wernig
Non member countries	
Poland	Sylvia Kielczykowska
Ukraine	Svitlana Shlapatska Vlada Sychkova Olga Semenchuk
Finland	Tuija Gadd
Germany	Christina Haarman
Israel	Boris Jakobson
Estonia	Ave-Ly Toomvap
Other participants	
European Commission	Bernard Van Goethem Thierry Chalus Regina Eberhart
WOAH RR Moscow	Budimir Plavsic Marina Sokolova Arsenty Polyakov Jean Perchet
WOAH SRR Astana	Aigerim Zhorgabayeva
WOAH SRR Brussels	Valeria Carolina Colombo
FAO	Eran Raizman Yu Qiu Karima Ouali Katinka De Balogh
ANSES	Florence Cliquet Emmanuelle Robardet

Opening Remarks

Dr Plavsic (SGE Secretariat) opened the meeting and passed the floor to the President of the GF-TADs for Europe on behalf of WOA and FAO colleagues.

Dr Van Goethem, President of the GF-TADs Regional Steering committee for Europe, stressed that Rabies eradication is a priority for Europe and therefore for the GF-TADs for Europe. The main goal is to fight and eliminate Rabies in wildlife in South-eastern Europe. He thanked the secretariat and FAO for organizing the meeting, along with the experts of the WB project and the EU Reference Laboratory for Rabies. In Eastern Europe there is a lot of experience on how to eradicate Rabies, but this should be coupled with consistent implementation to make sure Rabies does not spread again. The situation has improved over the last years in the region, but it is important to safeguard the achievements with Rabies.

The objectives of the meeting are to put emphasis on the main pillars of the combat against Rabies, namely oral vaccination and surveillance in the wild fauna, and to get an update on all

activities performed in this regard by countries in the region, as well as by international bodies under regional projects.

In total, 41 participants attended the meeting representing all the SGE members, and relevant international bodies (EC, FAO and the WOA regional office). The Presidency had also invited one expert from the Animal Disease Eradication in the Western Balkans (ADEWB) project and from the EU reference laboratory for Rabies to give presentations, and three additional countries as observers (Poland, Moldova and Ukraine), who are in close geographical proximity to the Southeast Europe region and are also affected by Rabies.

FAO activities regarding Rabies relevant to the region

Dr Yu Qiu gave a presentation on the general aspects of the global fight against Rabies by FAO.

- Global Rabies control strategy of zero by thirty: the goal of this ongoing operation is to have zero human deaths by dog-mediated Rabies by 2030 through a stepwise approach with objectives of reducing the risk of human Rabies deaths, providing guidance and data, and sustaining commitment and resources to this programme.
- Currently, the project is in phase 2 of a strategy that is described in an agenda called 'United against Rabies' with the Global Alliance for Rabies Control (GARC)
- The United against Rabies forum was launched in 2020, it provides an inclusive network of stakeholders.
- Stepwise approach to Rabies elimination (SARE) from stage 0 to stage 5, progressing towards Rabies freedom.
- Special focus was made on country progress across the world and work on national templates with a view to build global approaches and make sure countries are progressing in this stepwise approach.
- ORV is also used in dogs to help reduce dog transmitted Rabies. FAO recommends that vaccination should be safe, effective, and efficient; baits must be attractive and release the vaccine well, and have effective and suitable distribution systems that are adapted to the country.
- FAO has created videos on Rabies that are available on YouTube. This year FAO has a stakeholder conference on November 6-8 in Rome that can be very useful for countries to attend with both physical and online participation.

Dr Van Goethem thanked for the opportunity to understand the global initiative and the global programmes that the region is a part of.

Beyond the western Balkans Project ADEWB – follow up initiative

Speaking on behalf of Dr Kirandjiski, Dr Cliquet (ADEWB project) presented the follow up initiative to the Western Balkans project "capacity building of veterinary and plant health services in the wWestern Balkans" and explained that the new project has a 3-year duration, is again fully funded by the EU (with special involvement of DG NEAR and DG SANTE) and is implemented by a consortium involving "Agriconsulting Europe" and "IZS Teramo".

The project will build on the results of the first phase and will involve veterinary authorities, but also relevant stakeholders (e.g. farmers, hunters). Its main objectives are to help Western Balkan countries be ready in the perspective of their future accession to the EU, to improve the sanitary and phytosanitary situation in these countries, to achieve disease-free status, to enhance competent authorities capacity and foster regional cooperation.

As regards Rabies, the project will aim to:

- improve effectiveness of WB in detecting, fighting and limiting the size of Rabies outbreaks.
- adopt exit strategies after a decade of ORV programmes.

Two national experts per country will have to be appointed to fully cooperate with the project team. The work will include:

- For passive surveillance: the development, in line with EU legislation and standards, of a specific template for the preparation of national Rabies surveillance programmes and an in-depth-analysis of such plans when ready.
- For ORV: an assessment of the ORV programmes carried out in the region since 2010, and based on this analysis, providing technical recommendations on the steps to achieve Rabies-free status and, more particularly, on an exit strategy or of the need to prolong ORV activities., Rabies.
- For regional cooperation, supporting the expert group with the experts nominated in each country to secure a coordinated approach to Rabies control and defining a standard set of information to be exchanged on regular intervals between WB countries.

Dr Cliquet concluded her presentation by calling for a consolidation of the achievements: securing funding for ORV if necessary, and guaranteeing robust surveillance data.

Retrospective analysis of seroprevalence and bait uptake estimations in foxes after Oral Rabies vaccination programmes at European level: lessons learned and paths forward

Dr Emmanuelle Robardet (EU reference Lab for Rabies) presented the results of a study carried out by her team on bait uptake and seroprevalence estimations after ORV programmes..

- the study was started in 2020
- one of the issues discussed was a new trend observed in some MS according to which the percentage of vaccine uptake (as calculated by tetracycline marking) is constant over the years, but seroconversion is decreasing.
- This trend was observed in all participating countries in the last years.
- The study assessed different factors able to influence such trend and revealed that the only variable that was significantly correlated to:
 - o the loss in detected seroconversion over time was the type of serology test.
 - o the bait uptake was significantly correlated to the maximum temperature during the ORV programme.
- In conclusion:
 - o A single serological test with a common threshold value should be preferably used to evaluate seroconversion and avoid deviations
 - o As when max temperature increase, bait uptake goes down, exploring better bait design (including composition) may be of interest, but also optimizing baiting periods can be studied.

Dr Van Goethem thanked for these conclusions and hoped member countries could take them into account, even if it is not possible to impose the use of a single test.

Dr Jakobson congratulated participants in the project for active participation. He asked if there was an effect of a distribution pattern, the bait density, and the fox density which would have to be taken into account when comparing tetracyclin uptake and seroconversion. He stressed that the season is also very impactful and referred to a paper published on baiting campaigns in Kosovo. He also pointed out that in many cases, if the Rabies prevalence is low, it is not useful to have bait campaigns twice a year, but it is important to reach the juveniles when they are dispersing.

On temperatures, Dr Cliquet agreed that it is very important to vaccinate in autumn as the bait is more stable, but also because the juveniles start to disperse. Unfortunately, when we are not sure of the status of a country, she kept up the recommendation to vaccinate twice a year to reach

newborn cubs in late June. Vaccinating in autumn only can be very good for instance in Finland as it is a free country and has had free status for a long time. A risk assessment should be carried out to determine the number of vaccinations necessary.

Dr Robardet added that fox population is not standardized and was included in the modeling by included hunting bags. For bait distribution, since there is GPS data and no countries declared problems, it was not included in data analysis.

Updates from the member countries of the SGE RAB5

The updates were introduced by a presentation on the situation of Rabies in the EU presented by Dr Chalus which showed the following dynamics:

- Close to complete eradication of Rabies in the EU in 2019-2020
- Resurgence in Poland in 2021, incursion in 2022 from Rabies endemic zones in free MS (Hungary and Slovakia) and in Romania
- Cases in previously free Member States were detected at the eastern border with Ukraine, possibly related to the war in Ukraine which also had certainly an impact on wild fauna and stray dogs.
- Globally 82 cases were notified in the EU and Moldova in 2022 while 26 cases were notified in 2023.
- From a legal point of view, it is of paramount importance of surveillance and timely detection of the disease. If presence of Rabies virus is detected, affected countries must develop a compulsory eradication programme with a critical role of ORV for wild foxes.
- EU continues to co-finance eradication programmes with a view to:
 - o Prevent re-incursion from non-Rabies free areas
 - o Eradicate the disease where present.

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

The following highlights should be noted:

- **Poland** (Sylwia kielczykowska)
 - o Rabies cases in domestic animals were detected in 2022, and cases in wild fauna were detected in 2023.
 - o ORV was carried out for the entire country from 2012 to 2014 and then, limited to fewer and fewer regions to reach 4 regions in 2020. In 2022 they enlarged to 5 and then 6 regions since because of outbreaks near free areas.
 - o Evolution of surveillance numbers with a dip in 2020-2021: for now passive and active surveillance are giving positive results.
 - o Waiting for confirmation of the spring campaign 2024.
- **Ukraine** (Vlada Sishkova)
 - o Rabies was detected in domestic and wild animals in 2023, in humans in 2022.
 - o ORV was not carried out last year. It was carried out in four regions at the end of May 2023, was done according to the agreement with the military administration; layout of baits was done manually due to a flight ban.
 - o In 2022 passive surveillance was very important and is ongoing for 2023.
 - o Vaccination and surveillance are planned for fall of 2023 and 2024 pending approval.
- **Slovakia** (Martin Chudý)
 - o Last cases in dog, badgers, red fox, in 2022 with animals coming from Ukraine, again positive cases detected in passive surveillance in 2023.
 - o ORV will be ongoing due to this and is planned for 2024.
 - o Partial vaccination in the east of the country.
- **Slovenia** (Jerdt Maurer Wernig)
 - o No change from the last meeting. No vaccination since 2019, no cases detected in surveillance (emergency vaccine stock available).

- **Hungary** (Bence Gyuro)
 - o Rabies was detected in domestic animals 2022 and in wild animals 2023, both close to the Ukrainian border.
 - o Doing spring and autumn ORV campaigns in a specific area in 2021-2022-2023 at the border with Romania and Ukraine.
 - o Active and passive surveillance are ongoing; vaccination is planned for 2023-2024.
 - o Awareness campaigns.
- **Romania** (Cristian Siposean)
 - o Occurrence in 2023 in pets and wild animals. Big increase in 2022 with cases bordering Ukraine. Now again endemic situation in the northern part of Romania.
 - o Vaccination planned but waiting for procurement doing only fall vaccination since 2022. No vaccination at all in 2021 because of a procurement problem.
 - o Increased the passive surveillance numbers.
 - o Implementing buffer zones around outbreaks.
- **Moldova** (Oxana Popa) NFSA
 - o Last cases in wildlife detected in 2022 and in domestic animals in 2023.
 - o Many people need to get treatment because of dog bites.
 - o In 2022 there were two campaigns and in 2023 a fall campaign is planned.
 - o Not possible to fly 60 km near the border with Ukraine, thus there were no air drops of baits there. Ongoing surveillance. Plans for 2024 also cover the whole country for two campaigns.
- **Croatia** (Budimir Plavsic, due to unavailability of representatives)
 - o No cases since 2013-2014 (wild and domestic) and surveillance ongoing
 - o Spring campaign ongoing with a delay due to the tender procedure. Luckily it is not too hot.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (Alexandar Nemet)
 - o no major changes since the last case in 2020, following six years without cases.
 - o 2023 spring campaign will be the last one because of the absence of identified funding.
- **Serbia** (Tatjana Labus)
 - o Plans to vaccinate in the fall in 2023. Passive surveillance in full country.
- **Kosovo*** (Budimir Plavsic, on behalf)
 - o Not reported for a long time
 - o ORV ongoing until spring 2023 included. Very low surveillance. They are trying to secure funds from the government for the fall vaccination campaign.
- **Montenegro** (Milan Rogosic)
 - o Surveillance ongoing
 - o No funding from EC for the ORV campaign so they will stop vaccination
- **North Macedonia** (Vanja Konratenko)
 - o No cases since 2012
 - o ORV was carried out up to now, but if no more EU funds are available there will be only one campaign in 2023.
 - o A simplified procedure was set up for pets coming from Ukraine, and they have vaccinated them systematically when needed.
- **Greece** (Chrysoula Dile):
 - o Last case in 2014
 - o ORV ongoing vaccination within 50km from the land border.
 - o Surveillance ongoing and negative results
 - o Reflecting on what to do next.
 - o No flexibility for refugee animals.

Discussion:

Dr Jakobson noted that the lifespan of foxes is 2-3 years. Country like Serbia with no Rabies since 11 years should be free. He questioned the meaning of continued vaccination operations.

Dr Van Goethem explained that in the region, experience with reintroduction and rapid spread shows that it is preferable to avoid stopping vaccination too early. Dr Cliquet added that there had been an important discussion about the necessity to continue to vaccinate when there is insufficient data to prove the free status of the country. She referred to the experience in France where cases were found again when surveillance was increased after 18 months without any cases. Passive surveillance should be very strong before exiting vaccination.

Dr Van Goethem thanked participants for their input and transparency.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The SGE RAB secretariat presented the draft recommendations to be discussed as in annex. The Secretariat of the GF-TADs indicated that it would circulate these draft recommendations and participants would be invited to reply before July 14th COB.

Recommendations were shared and it was agreed that participants would have until the 14th of July to submit comments.

Closing remarks - Future steps

The SGE RAB will meet again approximately by mid-June 2024 (after WOH GS) with the same focus. It is suggested that it be organised in Brussels. It can be again attempted back to back with the SGE ASF and can start on Day 1 afternoon, with ASF starting on Day 2.

NB: all presentations of the SGE RAB5 are available on the [webpages dedicated to SGE on Rabies](#).

Annex:

Conclusions and recommendations

- Considering that:

Rabies eradication is a GF-TADs and One Health priority for Europe as a region of 53 Member Countries;

Experience in Europe shows that rabies can be eradicated if oral rabies vaccination campaigns (ORV), coupled with robust surveillance, are implemented consistently, twice a year, over several consecutive years, including at least two years after the last confirmed case of rabies when strong passive surveillance is implemented;

The epidemiological situation in Europe is progressively improving as the number of cases has dramatically decreased in the last years; except in few areas.

In certain countries of the region, surveillance remains the weakest point of their rabies eradication programmes, particularly as regards the testing of indicator¹ animals for rabies detection (passive or general surveillance); as a result, in some countries/territories, the number of animals sampled and tested is low and this compromises eradication efforts and overall success achieved during last decade.

There is a non-negligible administrative burden of implementation of ORV and surveillance, including budget allocation and procurement of vaccines and diagnostics, and services for oral vaccine distribution, which is often managed by different authorities or stakeholders in respective countries.

It is necessary to safeguard and consolidate the achievements on rabies control, accomplished so far by the combined efforts of all sectors in all countries/territories, in the region of South-East Europe

General conclusions and recommendations

The Standing Group of Experts on Rabies for Europe recommends:

To uphold coordination of measures between countries in the region, including on ORV and surveillance, and dialogue between CVOs and animal health officers from Veterinary Authorities, experts and representatives of GF-TADs, and therefore, consider organizing one meeting of the SGE on Rabies every year, preferably in face-to-face format. Different regional initiatives can be considered for this, such as the Animal Disease Eradication Western Balkans Initiatives.

To task SGE Secretariat (WOAH Regional Representation in Moscow) to continue regional coordination on Rabies in the region of Europe, to facilitate monitoring of the implementation eradication programs in the Members, in collaboration with FAO, the European Commission and SGE Members, and promote any actions relevant for rabies eradication

1. To develop pathways to facilitate sustainable planning and implementation of rabies eradication programmes, including administrative (procurement, capacity building) and disease control activities (e.g. preventive vaccinations, including ORV, surveillance, awareness raising) . SGE members should continue building own capacities to implement these activities in close collaboration with relevant national authorities within the GF-TADs and One Health frameworks, and with EU Delegations in respective countries when relevant, with a view to start with these activities well in advance and to implement a strong project management prior to and during their implementation.
2. To promote regular and transparent epidemiological information sharing from countries/territories in the region with other GF-TADs members (e.g. disease notification through ADIS and WAHIS) within the GF-TADs and One Health frameworks, and stimulate cross-border coordination of rabies control measures.
3. To open the membership of the Standing Group of Experts on Rabies in Europe to other countries in the region of Europe where the epidemiological situation has deteriorated or the risk of spreading of rabies has increased, and to invite observers from the One Health framework organizations.
4. To foster the active engagement of experts participating in the ongoing EU-funded project for the Western Balkans, or other projects, with a view to bring substantial technical support, expertise in various areas, data analysis capabilities, administrative procedures, design of surveillance and rabies control programmes, and other related aspects, as all of which will greatly enrich and improve SGE performances.

Recommendations on oral vaccination campaigns against rabies (ORV)

5. To continue with ORV efforts and ensure it is implemented for at least six consecutive years and not ceased earlier than two years after the last confirmed case of rabies (golden standard), provided that appropriate passive surveillance is performed and monitoring of vaccination in accordance with international standards and/or best practices.
6. To consider phasing out of vaccination only after careful risk assessment (importance of surveillance data) and within a regional perspective, as the situation

in bordering countries/territories should be taken into account before any decision in this regard due to the fact that premature cease of vaccination in a country/territory might jeopardise rabies eradication in the whole region of South-East Europe.

7. To secure and strengthen adequate coordination of ORV amongst bordering countries/territories in terms of timing and vaccination areas, as it is of paramount importance to eradicate the disease. This is particularly relevant in areas close to the international borders where the adequate coverage of the areas with vaccine baits might be challenging.
8. To draw up specific arrangements at national level for the sustainable supply of vaccines to ensure timely response to any evolution in the rabies situation, including for emergency vaccination in case of rabies resurgence.

Recommendations on rabies surveillance

9. To step up efforts on rabies surveillance as it remains a key point for rabies eradication programmes, and recall the importance of passive surveillance² which appears to be still a weak point in some countries or areas where the number of animals sampled and tested is low.
10. To boost awareness raising efforts, amongst competent authorities, hunters, farmers and all other stakeholders involved as a good tool to improve passive surveillance, by allocating sufficient resources, providing trainings, implementing procedures and improving coordination amongst these stakeholders based on GF-TADs and One Health approaches. EU funded project(s) may also be important tool(s) to support SGE Members in designing proper sample size and providing operating procedures/guidance to improve national surveillance programmes. In the case of budgetary constraints, number of samples for active surveillance could be reduced to increase number of samples for passive surveillance.
11. To increase surveillance in proximity of any new cases to appropriately estimate the extension of the outbreak and take an informed decision of the area to be vaccinated.
12. To ensure greater coordination of surveillance activities for Rabies with activities implemented for other TADs (e.g. ASF, HPAI) to ensure cost-effective and complementary work, particularly if these actions involve coordination with hunting associations and other stakeholders, training and awareness raising campaigns, including towards the general public.
13. To ensure the maximum realization of plans for surveillance for rabies in wildlife and domestic animals in the current context of habitat disruption, migration of humans and animals (e.g. pets) due to the situation in Ukraine.
14. To call for regular epidemiological information sharing with members of the GF-TADs framework and other parties within the One Health Framework to allow an informed decision of the areas to be vaccinated and regional coordination of rabies control measures.