



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
6th meeting (SGE RAB6)
In person meeting, 11th July 2024

Draft Report

Summary

On 11 July 2024, Members of the SGE on Rabies attended the sixth Standing Group of Experts on Rabies (SGE RAB6). The SGE RAB6 was held as a hybrid event with 41 participants (33 in person and 8 connected virtually) from 17 countries and four international organizations (EC, FAO, WHO and WOAH). Members provided reports on their epidemiological situation, activities, and plans in terms of surveillance and oral vaccination against Rabies. Three new countries—Moldova, Poland, and Ukraine—were included as full Members of the SGE on Rabies for Europe.

Experts invited: The presidency invited two experts to present updates on the follow-up project for animal disease eradication in the Western Balkans (ADEWB). A WOAH expert from Israel provided valuable insights into Israel's experiences in rabies control. Additionally, representatives from WHO and FAO discussed ongoing projects focused on rabies in Ukraine.

Main discussions: The coordination in planning and executing Oral Rabies Vaccination (ORV) campaigns between neighbouring countries, as well as strengthening surveillance with a special focus on the number of suspected animals sampled, were highlighted as crucial for consolidating the achievements made over the years. Moreover, the presidency offered support to the Members by inviting the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) to meet with non-EU countries on the sidelines of the meeting. Throughout the meeting, experts and Members emphasized the regional coordination to achieve and consolidate progress in rabies control.

It was agreed to hold the next meeting, SGE RAB7, in person, and Members were invited to propose the next location for welcoming the group.

Opening Remarks

Dr Hamelin (WOAH Sub-Regional Representative in Brussels) opened the meeting and passed the floor to the President of the GF-TADs for Europe, Dr Van Goethem, on behalf of WOA and FAO colleagues.

The President expressed his satisfaction with being almost all together in Brussels after so many years of virtual meetings. He also thanked the Rabies SGE Secretariat for organising the event and for providing valuable technical support and AFSCA for agreeing to host the event. He expressed his gratitude to FAO and WHO representatives and the experts of the EU regional action on animal disease eradication in the Western Balkans and from Israel for their participation. Dr Van Goethem stressed that the Standing Group of Experts on Rabies in Europe remains the platform of choice to share and discuss activities and experiences and highlighted that rabies eradication is a priority for Europe. He recalled that the EU experience shows that wildlife rabies can be eradicated if oral rabies vaccination (ORV) campaigns and robust surveillance are implemented consistently. He stressed further that combined efforts of all countries are necessary to safeguard and consolidate the achievements on rabies control accomplished in Southeast Europe.

Dr Van Goethem highlighted that the event was organized with two primary objectives: to emphasize the key pillars in the fight against rabies, specifically oral vaccination and wildlife surveillance, and to provide an update on related activities undertaken by regional countries and international bodies through regional projects.

Following the delegates' approval of the agenda, he introduced the first speaker.

WOAH - Global situation update on Rabies

Dr Daptardar from the Science Department at WOA Headquarters emphasized the prioritization of rabies and the importance of timely reporting of all cases in domestic and wildlife populations. She presented tools available to support the "Zero By 30" initiative, including the WOA Rabies Vaccine Bank, United Against Rabies Forum, WOA Standards, and self-declaration processes. Following this, Dr Daptardar provided an update on the global and European rabies situation, highlighting the necessity of controlling rabies in domestic animals, specifically in zones where rabies is mediated by dogs, to prevent spillover to wild animals. This spillover can significantly impact wildlife rabies status, species conservation, and poses risks to domestic animals and human health.

The presentation also covered various aspects of oral vaccination in dogs and wildlife, emphasizing the standards and practical differences between the two approaches. The discussion underscored the importance of adhering to these standards for effective implementation.

During the discussion, participants requested an updated map showing the status of rabies epidemiology, including countries free from rabies and those that have self-declared as such. Dr Olena Kuriata from WHO also asked for the endorsement of the official control program procedure and Dr Daptardar agreed to provide this information to interested parties.

Participants noted that the European region has consistently reported wildlife rabies cases, while other regions show fewer cases, primarily due to underreporting.

Rabies situation and relevant activities in the EU

Dr Chalus from the Animal Health Unit at the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) of the European Commission presented the comprehensive legal framework in force at EU level on animal health (i.e. the 'Animal Health Law') and the specific control measures relating to rabies. Dr Chalus emphasized that vaccination campaigns and surveillance are crucial components for eradicating the disease across all Member States (MS). He also stated that under the current legal framework, countries not yet rabies-free must implement compulsory eradication programs.

He then provided a rabies epidemiological update focused on the EU region, highlighting countries with ongoing eradication programs. Dr Chalus discussed the resurgence of rabies over the past three years in certain countries, presenting data on the evolution of cases from 2020 to the present. He stressed that rabies remains a priority disease for the EU, which continues to support EU and certain non-EU countries by co-funding or funding control programs. The main objectives are to prevent re-incursions from non-rabies-free areas and to eradicate the disease where it is present. He informed participants that for 2025-2027, 12 EU countries, along with 6 non-EU countries (Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and Kosovo*), have requested financial support.

During the discussion, Dr Van Goethem offered support to the Members by inviting the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA) to meet with non-EU countries on the sidelines of the meeting. This initiative was well received, and some Members, such as the Republic of North Macedonia, engaged in discussions with HaDEA staff to address pending matters. After thanking Dr Chalus, the President gave the floor to Dr Hamelin, who invited the Western Balkan (WB) countries to present the state of their situations.

Updates from the member countries of the SGE RAB6 –Western Balkan countries

At the invitation of Dr Hamelin, the WB countries presented updates on their rabies situation from south to north, beginning with an online presentation from Albania. Following Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo*, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia gave their reports. Due to travel issues, Montenegro's representative presented during the afternoon session. All presentations are available on the Rabies SGE GF-TADs website.

Key highlights include:

- Representatives from Albania reported that due to budget constraints, no oral rabies vaccination campaign is planned for 2024. The 2025 campaign is still uncertain as funds have been redirected towards controlling African Swine Fever and Brucellosis.
- Dr Mickova from North Macedonia highlighted that passive surveillance remains a weak point and that the 2023 awareness campaigns did not yield the expected improvements in surveillance.
- Dr Boban, Serbia's representative, discussed plans to enhance passive surveillance and additional activities related to pet and wildlife movement. He requested support from regional authorities to strengthen coordination. Dr Boban also noted an increase in bait density from 22 to 25 along border lines and emphasized the importance of synchronizing their campaign with Bosnia's for greater effectiveness.

Dr Van Goethem underscored the importance of improving the timing of campaigns between bordering countries to enhance their effectiveness and emphasized the need for information exchange.

Dr Hamelin commended the openness of the Members in discussing both their strengths and weaknesses in the fight against rabies.

Results of the assessment of the Oral rabies vaccination campaigns in the Western Balkans 2017 – 2023

Dr Kirandjiski provided an overview of the ADEWB project activities related to rabies. He discussed aspects of Oral Rabies Vaccination conducted in the involved countries, including bait density in targeted and non-targeted areas from 2017 to 2023. He noted that 2018 was the only year in which all six countries implemented ORV campaigns, though these were rarely conducted simultaneously. When ORV campaigns were implemented, they met the requirements for bait density and uniform distribution of vaccine baits. However, he acknowledged occasional gaps in bait distribution, though these were not consecutive and bait distribution near borders was satisfactory.

The expert recommended improving regional coordination when planning ORV campaigns and emphasized the importance of close monitoring to identify gaps, implement measures, and prevent inconsistencies, including post-vaccination monitoring. He highlighted Albania's sustainable monitoring as an example of good post-vaccination practices.

Dr Van Goethem thanked Dr Kirandjiski for his valuable and extensive work on the project, reinforcing the importance of regional coordination among the Members. He reminded participants that HaDEA was present to assist with the reimbursement procedure for the 2024 campaigns and the 2025-2027 grant application. He explained that the Agency will work on the proposals from October 2024 to January 2025 and will prepare the contracts for signing in January 2025.

ADEWB II recommendations for “Rabies elimination programme in the Western Balkans 2024”

Dr. Cliquet presented an overview of the main activities and achievements since 2010, emphasizing that WB countries have been close to rabies elimination since 2020 and that the most challenging work has been accomplished. She emphasized that rabies detection is easier and cheaper than monitoring post-vaccination efficacy, making passive surveillance crucial for considering the phasing out of vaccination.

The expert also presented an analysis of passive surveillance pressure in 2022, based on samples received at the EU Reference Laboratory (ANSES-Nancy). She explained that the surveillance index, (calculated as the ratio of the number of laboratory tests conducted per country in 2022 to the size of the country), is heterogeneous in the Western Balkans and statistically much lower than the lowest ratios from other countries. She highlighted that this ratio can be a useful tool for estimating the number of animals to test annually according to each country's size.

She stressed the necessity of increasing passive surveillance to demonstrate the absence of the disease, noting that the key metric is the number of suspected animals tested, not the number of positive cases. To increase this number, she recommended raising awareness and involving local stakeholders, such as human health services and hunting associations, through training. She pointed to examples of countries that have successfully eradicated rabies, such as Germany, France, and Belgium, highlighting the strong network built among these countries to achieve this milestone.

Updates from the member countries of the SGE RAB6 –Second Part

At the invitation of Dr Beltran-Alcrudo, the rest of the Members presented their current rabies situations from north to south, starting with Poland. These presentations are available on the GF-TADs website.

The following highlights were noted:

- Dr Đurić from Serbia inquired why Romania only vaccinated the western part of the country, neglecting the east. Dr Siposean (Romania's representative) explained that weather conditions influenced this decision, and that the western area was prioritized due to the epidemiological situation in neighbouring countries. He continued noticing that the distributor faced penalties for the under distribution of baits during the vaccination period.
- Dr Lohman, Croatia's representative, highlighted the potential benefits of multiannual programs to reduce bureaucratic burdens and avoid delays in campaign starts. They faced challenges in achieving the expected numbers for active surveillance due to hunters' lack of awareness, despite compensation for sampling. Dr. Lohman also explained that, despite the absence of rabies in their territory, they continue the ORV due to the epidemiological situation in neighbouring countries.
- Dr Major, from Hungary reported a rise in rabies cases mainly among wild animals, noting that they doubled the bait density in the affected regions in the last ORV campaigns.

ICG support in rabies control for Ukraine (online)

Dr Rozstalnyy, FAO representative & ICG Coordinator, provided an overview of the group's recent activities. He highlighted the challenges Ukraine faces in controlling rabies in wildlife due to the armed conflict. These challenges include a ban on hunting, the inability to conduct aerial distribution of vaccine baits, and abandoned fields that provide shelter for wild and stray domestic animals.

Dr Rozstalnyy outlined the ICG's expected short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes and explained how their work is organized to achieve these goals. This includes focusing on current national legislation, provision of laboratory test kits, and training personnel for diagnostics. He also mentioned the development of a pilot project for ORV in dogs, aimed at setting standards and establishing proper methodology.

Combating Rabies: WHO's Multisectoral Strategies and One Health Communication (online)

Dr Kuriata presented an overview of WHO's rabies activities and multisectoral One Health initiatives, including communication efforts. She highlighted the Rabies Conference held in Ukraine in October 2023, which brought together international experts and stakeholders from various sectors, such as human health and hunting associations. The conference aimed to establish a cooperation mechanism among all involved parties.

As part of the national strategy against rabies, Ukraine has launched targeted communication campaigns to raise awareness and prevent disease transmission. These campaigns focus on specific groups, including soldiers, schools, and the general public.

Israel's experience in rabies control & wildlife-domestic interface (online)

Dr Yakobson provided an overview of the rabies situation in Israel, noting that cattle is the species most affected by spillover from wildlife, with jackals being the main reservoir of the disease. He explained that molecular typing helps experts understand the geographical origins of different incursions and resurgences, such as the 7b type originating from Jordan.

The expert also discussed the challenges, advantages, and disadvantages of oral vaccination in dogs, emphasizing that it should complement parenteral vaccination and be used only when animals are not reachable for the latter option. He underscored the interest that the use of drones can present as an alternative tool for bait dispersal. This technology is useful in areas where airplanes cannot fly due to geography or special situations, such as armed conflicts. The process

involves a small drone creating a map of the territory to be covered, followed by a larger drone dispersing the vaccine baits. This technology has also been used for other purposes, such as distributing rodent poison. During the rabies outbreak from 2017-2018 in juvenile jackals, drones successfully covered areas of the country that were otherwise unreachable by airplane.

Discussion:

During the final part of the meeting, Dr Dubois, on behalf of the SGE Secretariat, proposed that participants complete a short survey to gather ideas and suggestions for the next SGE on Rabies in 2025. She emphasized that member participation is a crucial part of the spirit of the SGEs, inviting them to also send ideas and proposals through the Secretariat's email. Attendees responded to two questions.

As results, all participants supported the idea of including a speed-dating activity. This activity involves 15-minute face-to-face interactions among neighbouring countries (2 or 3 countries with common borders) to exchange and discuss common concerns and explore joint actions.

Secondly, participants were asked to choose two main topics for the next meeting from four options. The voting results were as follows:

- Sustainability of ORV campaigns: funding, logistics, and post-campaign monitoring received 73% (10 votes).
- Surveillance and awareness campaigns: each received 43% (6 votes).
- Cross-border cooperation: received 14% (2 votes).

It was stressed that Members' participation for planning the next SGE on Rabies or other activities and ideas or suggestions are highly welcome.

The President thanked the participants and experts for their input, exchange, and transparency.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Dr Van Goethem concluded the meeting by re-emphasizing the importance of coordinated measures among countries in the region and the critical role played by consistently applied ORV and surveillance to eradicate rabies. He underscored the need for ongoing dialogue between Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) and animal health officers from Veterinary Authorities.

Additionally, the President announced that the Republic of Moldova, Poland, and Ukraine have been invited to become full Members of the Rabies Standing Group of Experts for Europe. Plans are also underway to invite Azerbaijan, Georgia, and potentially other countries to join the next SGE on Rabies next year as invited countries.

Dr Chalus provided a summary of the draft recommendations to be discussed.

The President of GF-TADs indicated that these draft recommendations would be circulated, and participants would have until July 19th COB, to respond.

Closing remarks - Future steps

The SGE RAB will meet again approximately in one year. It was agreed to hold the SGE RAB7 face-to-face and Members were invited to propose venues for welcoming the group next year.

NB: all presentations of the SGE RAB6 are available on the [webpages dedicated to SGE on Rabies](#).

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 wildlife 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 and taking also into consideration rabies situation in adjacent areas.
- The epidemiological situation mainly in South-East 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 the 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:

1. 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, to continue organizing one meeting of the SGE on Rabies every year, preferably face-to-face. Different regional/sub-regional initiatives can also be considered to consolidate the coordination, such as the Animal Disease Eradication Western Balkans (ADEWB) initiatives.
2. To task SGE Secretariat (WOAH Sub-Regional Representation in Brussels) to continue regional coordination on Rabies in Europe, to facilitate monitoring of the implementation of eradication programs by Members, in collaboration with FAO, the European Commission and SGE Members, and promote any actions relevant for rabies eradication.

¹ Suspect or indicator animals are animals that show clinical signs or abnormal behaviour suggestive of rabies, animals found dead, road-kills and animals involved in human exposure.

3. To develop pathways to facilitate sustainable, and if possible medium to long-term (e.g. multi-year), 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 their 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.
4. 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.
5. To include Poland, Ukraine and Moldova as full members of the SGE on Rabies, and as such to ensure their participation in future Rabies SGE meetings to share their experience and receive relevant guidance.
6. To continue monitoring the epidemiological situation in the region of Europe to be ready to open the membership of the SGE on Rabies in Europe to other countries where the epidemiological situation in wildlife has deteriorated or the risk of spreading of rabies has increased, and to continue inviting observers from other countries and the One Health framework organizations.
7. To foster the active engagement of experts participating in the ongoing EU-funded project for the Western Balkans (ADEWB II), 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)

8. To continue with ORV efforts and ensure it is implemented twice a year 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 and monitoring of vaccination are performed in accordance with international standards and/or best practices.
9. 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 considered before any decision in this regard due to the fact that a premature cease of vaccination in a country/territory might jeopardise rabies eradication in the whole region of South-East Europe.
10. 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.
11. To draw up specific arrangements at national level for the sustainable and mid- to long-term 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

12. 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.
13. 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, all efforts should be focused to increase number of samples for passive surveillance irrespective of the level of active surveillance (monitoring of ORV).
14. 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.
15. 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

² Detection of indicator animals for rabies detection.

hunting associations and other stakeholders, training and awareness raising campaigns, including towards the general public.

16. 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 (both wildlife and pets accompanying their owners) due to the war of aggression against Ukraine.
17. 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