



WORLD ORGANISATION FOR ANIMAL HEALTH
Protecting animals, preserving our future

29th Conference of the
OIE Regional Commission for Europe
by videoconference, 9 and 10 November 2020

FINAL REPORT

Introduction

Following the kind offer of the Government of Italy during the 87th General Session of the World Assembly of Delegates of the OIE, held in Paris, France, in May 2019, the 29th Conference of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe was initially planned to take place in Catania, Sicily, from 9 to 13 November 2020. However, due to the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the OIE Council, following an extraordinary meeting held in June 2020, decided to adapt the Conference to a virtual format. Thus, the 29th Conference of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe was held on 9 and 10 November 2020, starting each day at 9:00 a.m. (Paris time), by videoconference (via Zoom).

A total of 140 participants, comprising OIE Delegates and/or representatives of 52 Members of the Region and senior officials from 10 regional and international organisations, attended the Conference.

Members of the Regional Commission for Europe attending the Conference: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Rep., Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldavia, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

International/regional organisations attending the Conference: European Commission (EC), European Council Secretariat, European Federation for Animal Health and Sanitary Security (FESASS), World Health Organization (WHO), World Farmers' Organization (WFO), Health for Animals, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), European Commission for the Control of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (EuFMD), International Coalition for Animal Welfare/Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ICFAW/RSPCA), Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) and World Animal Protection (WAP).

Also present on behalf of the OIE were: Dr Monique Eloit, OIE Director General, Dr Jean-Philippe Dop, OIE Deputy Director General "Institutional Affairs and Regional Activities", Dr Montserrat Arroyo Kuribreña, Head of the OIE Regional Activities Department, Dr Budimir Plavšić, OIE Regional Representative in Moscow, Dr Roberto Balbo, OIE Sub-Regional Representative in Brussels, Dr Mereke Taitubayev, OIE Sub-Regional Representative for Central Asia, Dr Karim Tounkara, OIE Regional Representative for Africa, Dr Rachid Bouguedour, OIE Sub-Regional Representative for North Africa, and Dr Hirofumi Kugita, OIE Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific. Additionally, relevant key experts and OIE technical and administrative staff also participated in this important event for the Europe region.

MONDAY 09 NOVEMBER 2020

Opening Ceremony

Dr Mark Schipp, President of the OIE World Assembly of Delegates, and Dr Maris Balodis, President of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe and Delegate of Latvia, welcomed the participants.

Dr Balodis highlighted in his message that, despite the pandemic, Veterinary Services in the region had continued to work actively to ensure the maintenance of safe and smooth international trade of animals and products of animal origin, following OIE standards and guidelines and working in collaboration with public health authorities. He recognised that the COVID-19 crisis had confirmed the importance of addressing the "One Health" concept at global, regional and national level. Dr Balodis applauded the high level of participation of Members in the Conference. He reminded participants of the recommendations adopted by the Regional Commission during its previous Regional Conference, held in Georgia in 2018, and the importance of fully implementing them.

Dr Schipp emphasised that the challenges faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic had reinforced the relevance and the role of the OIE and of Veterinary Services in general. He reminded participants that the OIE had already initiated a programme of work focused on addressing the disease risks associated with trade in wildlife. He noted that the response to COVID-19 had also been an opportunity to strengthen relationships within the One Health framework. Many veterinary laboratories had played a key role in supporting public health services with testing of samples. He added that this work had also been supported by the development of guidance by the OIE in the form of a document entitled Veterinary Laboratory Support to the Public Health Response for COVID-19.

Dr Schipp also noted that there had been many challenges during the crisis period, such as the drop in the number of WAHIS notifications, which may have been due to a fall in the number of disease events as a result of fewer movements of people, animals and animal products, but could also be a sign of other problems, such as reduced surveillance activity, difficulties with transport or reduced laboratory capacity to test animal samples. While recognising that it had been challenging to continue the important work of the OIE without the OIE Council being able to meet in person and with no OIE General Session being held – the first time this had occurred since the Second World War –, Dr Schipp emphasised that the OIE Council had continued to meet virtually to progress the essential work of the Organisation and to ensure the continued support for all its Members. He ended by inviting the Regional Commission for Europe to reflect on how to be better involved in the work of the OIE, how to continue collaborating on common priorities within the OIE and how to innovate to implement relevant recommendations and improve animal health and welfare worldwide, despite the challenges faced.

SESSION 1: IMPACTS AND LESSONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

OIE strategy and the COVID-19 pandemic: the wider picture

Challenges for the development and implementation of the Seventh OIE Strategic Plan in the post-pandemic world of COVID-19

Dr Monique Eloit, OIE Director General, began by welcoming all the participants and reminding them of the importance of Regional Conferences as the main institutional meeting at regional level, providing a key space for discussion and exchanges between the OIE and all its Members in order to ensure that all regional needs are well known and addressed by the Organisation. She pointed out that the Conference agenda had been developed in such a way as to ensure the interactive participation of all Members of the Region despite the virtual format.

Dr Eloit then went on to outline the Seventh Strategic Plan and inform participants about the adaptations that would be made to the Plan in order to meet the challenges of the “new world”. She also explained how the OIE saw the planning and implementation of its activities for the coming five years and emphasised the following aspects:

- The next OIE Strategic Plan will differ significantly from the previous ones because its development process was more inclusive, involving Members, partners and OIE staff. Also, the Seventh Strategic Plan promotes an Organisation that is more committed to explicitly stated values and guiding principles but, above all, rather than just updating the Sixth Strategic Plan, the Seventh Strategic Plan aims to create fresh momentum to continue building an Organisation ready to meet current and future challenges.
- As the new plan is less technical than previous ones, it is also more accessible to ministers, decision-makers and a wide range of partners, including resources partners. This is in line with the OIE's active participation in political forums, such as the G7, the G20 and other high-level ministerial meetings.
- The Strategic Plan has five main objectives: (1) scientific expertise; (2) transformation towards a digital model, with a data management strategy; (3) responding to the needs of Members; (4) fostering close collaboration with partners; and (5) ensuring efficiency and agility thanks to the application of modern processes and tools.
- The challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic has once again highlighted the need for more scientific expertise, in particular for assessing risks at the human/animal/environment interface, as well as the importance of strengthening existing agreements or establishing new ones with key

partners to be able to work actively and in coordination for the common good.

- The need to exchange more data, including more sophisticated data, with as many partners as possible, as well as the new ways of working (namely teleworking and virtual meetings), reinforce the relevance of the OIE's commitment to a digital transformation of the Organisation.
- The Seventh Strategic Plan, as proposed to the Membership, is still relevant. However, the prioritisation of these five strategic objectives – or, in other words, the speed of their respective implementation – will differ from what was envisaged one year ago. Undoubtedly, digital transformation is the most urgent objective, and success in implementing the other four objectives is highly dependent on the OIE's ability to accelerate its digital transformation.
- At the same time, other objectives should also be addressed, including the following: expanding and strengthening wildlife expertise; ensuring the relevance of OIE programmes for its Members based on the current context, for which the OIE Training Platform is a crucial tool; and adjusting the partnership strategy, including revitalising some of the existing partnership agreements, in particular with organisations involved in wildlife or environmental issues. The partnership with WHO must also be strengthened, which is key to future discussions on the global governance of any future health crises. Also, the OIE's internal processes must be modernised, which is one of the components of the Organisation's digital transformation.
- Finally, meeting the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic involves prioritising such areas as the management of animal health information systems, which will call for optimisation of the way in which the OIE manages its global and regional actions for the benefit of its Members.
- The implementation of all these activities in response to the new challenges will have a major impact, which Members must understand and accept, namely: OIE Headquarters staff will not be able to dedicate the same amount of time to "business as usual", as staff will need to focus on all the changes that must be undertaken, and traditional activities are likely to be reduced in order to concentrate temporarily on new areas, such as: wildlife, emergency preparedness and response and data management. The priority for recruitments will be given to digital transformation, in particular thanks to the money saved as a result of holding fewer meetings in 2020.

**The role of the OIE Regional Commission in emergency situations:
lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic and
future proposals on the functioning of the OIE in crisis situations**

Dr Balodis informed participants on how the Bureau of the Regional Commission could support the Region in emergency situations, mainly through the Regional Core Group, an excellent mechanism for discussion and regional interaction to ensure that all Members needs are brought to the attention of and addressed by the OIE. He provided proposals for future work based on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis, mainly in terms of reinforcing the communication and collaboration with Members through webinars, virtual activities, and consultations. He underlined the key role played by the Regional and Sub-Regional Representations in supporting all Members, by following up on their needs and ensuring their awareness of all OIE guidelines.

He noted that the current crisis had influenced the lives of everyone but pointed out that the Veterinary Services had continued to work actively to support their medical counterparts, as well as the work of the OIE itself. He emphasised that the One health approach had become more relevant than ever, and that high scientific expertise was key along with strong Veterinary Services. Dr Balodis concluded with a reminder that actively participating in OIE activities and complying with OIE standards and guidelines in general as well as ensuring the One Health approach through the reinforcement of Tripartite collaboration were key for multidisciplinary adaptation and pandemic preparedness to develop national capacities for early detection and rapid response.

Following the presentations by Dr Eloit and Dr Balodis, a plenary interaction exercise was organised, after which the Regional Commission concluded that:

- There is a need to strengthen WHO-FAO-OIE Tripartite collaboration to this end and to extend it to environmental international organisations.
- One Health is about more than just zoonotic diseases and is a concept based on strong, shared international expertise and surveillance.
- The OIE should lead the way in coordinating preparedness for potential pandemics.

- The response of the OIE community to the pandemic was very good and the guidelines provided were very useful.

The pandemic and the Veterinary Services: country lessons

The Delegates of The Netherlands, Uzbekistan, and Austria summarised the experiences of their countries during the COVID-19 pandemic and shared some lessons learned on providing veterinary services during the pandemic.

The Netherlands was the first country to detect the infection in mink; very rigorous steps were taken, including culling and the banning of breeding. The most challenging aspect of the pandemic was the need to adapt/change policies in a very short time to address an emergency that was completely new for the Veterinary Services, the public health sector and the governmental authorities in general. The Veterinary Services were one of the many players and private practitioners were also in the front line. Specialists were consulted and provided support in risk assessment as well as in provision of scientific explanations and updates to governmental authorities in order to facilitate decision-making and risk management.

In **Uzbekistan** the Veterinary Services established an incident management committee to coordinate the response to the COVID-19 pandemic at national level, including in collaboration with key national counterparts such as the public health authorities. Appropriate instructions regarding the implementation of preventive measures were given to all concerned parties (from public and private sectors) based on the recommendations of the OIE and the WHO. Instructions and guidelines developed at national level were based on the “One Health” approach.

Following OIE recommendations for diagnostic testing of human samples for SARS-CoV-2 in veterinary laboratories, the National Veterinary Services of Uzbekistan involved six regional diagnostic laboratories and more than 30 veterinary laboratory specialists in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, PCR diagnostic equipment was transferred to the health authorities and the support of PCR specialists was made available for medical laboratories.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) allocated 20 laboratory equipment to support the country in the rapid and accurate response.

In **Austria**, as the Veterinary Authority is part of the Ministry of Health, the Veterinary Services were directly involved in the national crisis management centre. The country has a very old and solid legislative framework (dating back to 1914) to respond to pandemics in close collaboration between the public and veterinary health sectors. Having a legislative framework of this kind allowed the creation and implementation of new laws as well as a very well-run working coordination, in a transparent manner, despite having to deal with a new disease and an unclear situation. The Veterinary Services used veterinary strategies such as monitoring, compartmentalisation, and risk-based surveillance, similar to what should be implemented when animal diseases occur, so as to allow a gradual return to normality. Regarding the main lessons learned by the country, it was highlighted that the most important measures to overcome a pandemic were as follows: to share experiences and best practices globally, to develop/implement global standards and guidelines to improve pandemic preparedness, such as those developed by the OIE and the European Union, and to improve transparency, timely notification, early warning and rapid response systems. The Delegate emphasised the importance of empowering mechanisms such as the Global Framework for the Progressive Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases (GF-TADs) and the European Commission for the Control of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (EuFMD) training system, and he particularly referred to the importance of notifying animal diseases through OIE-WAHIS as well as implementing real-time simulation exercises to be prepared for pandemic threats.

Following the experiences shared by the three countries, a breakout room discussion took place and the Regional Commission concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that:

- There is an urgent need to involve the Veterinary Services in public health activities, contingency planning (including for animal welfare issues), emergency management and both food safety and food security.
- Collaboration between veterinary laboratories and public health laboratories should be improved.

- Veterinary Services are an essential pillar of the One Health approach.
- When it comes to human and veterinary disease control and prevention there is a need to work on the prioritisation of activities, in close collaboration with other institutions in the public and private sector, including the environmental sector.
- The multisectoral approach is essential for the control of pandemics and the prevention of future crises.
- Better and more transparent communication is essential for the prevention and control of crises.
- The involvement of the Veterinary Services in the control of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown their essential role in society, both to ensure safer trade and to support the One Health concept globally.

Responding to future pandemics

New opportunities for collaboration with our partners to better support Member Countries

Representatives from WHO, FAO and the OIE briefly commented on their joint activities and the potential for future collaboration with the aim of helping countries to involve Veterinary Services at regional and national level in the application of the One Health concept.

Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, emphasised the necessity to increase solidarity and strengthen collaboration across the human and animal health sectors, and to engage stakeholders and countries to confront the devastating impact of SARS-CoV-2. Regarding the One Health approach, he reminded participants of the three areas of strategic focus to help drive change: i) supporting existing joint One Health commitments amid COVID-19; ii) mobilising behind the International Health Regulations (IHR); and iii) prioritising health on the political agenda. He pointed out that by strengthening collaboration between the human and animal health sectors, as well as with the environment sector, it would be possible to reduce risks of food safety hazards, zoonoses and other public health threats at the human–animal–ecosystems interface, and to respond to public health emergencies. He emphasised that the Tripartite collaboration was crucial in addressing emerging global issues, such as COVID-19. He commented that regional offices of the Tripartite Organisations were joining forces and scaling up efforts to support countries by forming a Regional Tripartite Joint Secretariat in Europe to coordinate action against antimicrobial resistance (AMR) across the region. He also reminded participants that the WHO IHR Monitoring and Evaluation Framework and the OIE PVS Pathway were the mechanisms to better build capacity and align strategies between human and animal health services across the region. Dr Kluge informed participants about the development of the WHO Europe independent structure – the Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development – designed to help elevate all aspects of health on the political agenda.

Mr Vladimir Olegovich Rakhmanin, FAO Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, emphasised the importance of strengthening cooperation among the three Organisations and uniting efforts to facilitate overcoming health crises. He underlined the key role of the agriculture and veterinary sectors and the current pressure inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic on the livestock industry and farmers, concluding that one of the priorities was to modernise and promote a more sustainable food safety system. Mr Rakhmanin reminded participants about the effective collaboration between FAO and the OIE in Europe with regard to the control of transboundary animal diseases (TADs), such as African swine fever (ASF), lumpy skin disease (LSD) and avian influenza, particularly under the GF-TADs mechanism. He also mentioned other threats on which there was also very good collaboration between the two Organisations, namely AMR and endemic diseases. He pointed out that the 'Tripartite Plus' structure, currently under development, would provide a mechanism to strengthen capacities for preparedness and control of new emerging zoonotic diseases with a coordinated approach, both regionally and nationally. He strongly suggested building an efficient bottom-up approach to better support farmers and field services and to maximise the outcomes and impact of both Organisations' work. He briefly reported on the earlier FAO Regional Conference for Europe, where members and policy leaders, including ministers, had confirmed strong support to the One Health initiatives. Mr Rakhmanin highlighted the everyday more evident need for strong collaboration between FAO, the OIE and WHO as well as with relevant stakeholders, such as private entities, civil society, and academia, to better support farmers in their efforts to build sustainable food chains.

Dr Budimir Plavšić, OIE Regional Representative in Moscow, underlined the perspective and importance of the multilateral approach and intersectoral collaboration to respond to the global health crisis. He confirmed the full commitment of the OIE to implement the One Health agenda. He reminded participants of the OIE's vision, including the importance placed on the sharing of responsibilities and the coordinating of activities to minimise health risks at the human–animal–ecosystems interface. He noted that this was already being well addressed at the international level by the Tripartite Plus partners and pointed out that it also needed to be promoted within the national context, through effective cooperation between the national competent authorities responsible for public, animal and environmental health. He also reminded participants of the long-standing experience of FAO, WHO and the OIE in direct collaboration, and that responding to risks related to zoonoses and other public health threats was complex and required multi-sectoral and multi-institutional cooperation. He pointed out the importance of strengthening wildlife management for control of zoonoses, including their integration in pandemic preparedness efforts and the development of appropriate legislative and disease monitoring measures. Finally, Dr Plavšić reminded participants that the OIE invited all health authorities, and particularly the veterinary competent authorities, to offer leadership and to mirror the example of the Tripartite agreement signed by the three Directors General of the OIE, WHO and FAO, supplemented by many operational tools, guidelines, strategic documents and policy papers, to take advantage of the momentum created by the current pandemic.

Following the interventions from the three Organisations and some interactive activities organised to better guide the resulting discussion, the Regional Commission concluded that:

- The recent efforts to control Covid-19 as well as previous experiences with highly pathogenic avian influenza have re-emphasised the need for cross-sectoral collaboration and have underscored the fact that successful and sustained results are possible when functional collaborations are established.
- Strengthening the One Health approach is the highest priority for Members and for the three Organisations.
- It is crucial for the three Organisations to keep improving their coordination, collaboration, and synergies, so as to use their capacities in an efficient way and avoid duplication.
- The OIE, WHO and FAO in Europe are committed to increasing collaboration and coordination with other partners and stakeholders, improving preparedness and strengthening capacities for rapid response to health crises, particularly those with pandemic potential. The three partners have expressed their intention for inclusive collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), to develop a fully operational Tripartite Plus context.
- The One Health agenda for Europe is to establish a Tripartite mechanism in Europe in the following months, with the involvement of all stakeholders, but also to work much more on joint education programmes, capacity-building activities, and cross-border development projects together with major partners, including the EC, the EEC, the World Bank, other international organisations, the private sector, civil society, scientific and research institutions and OIE Collaborating Centres.
- It is important to mobilise other sectors, including private and non-governmental organisations, to contribute to the development of a more holistic and collaborative approach to One Health in Europe.
- The AMR Multi-Partner Trust Fund is a very important instrument and is operational in several countries to help in the implementation of national AMR action plans.
- For priority zoonotic concerns, action plans should be developed at regional and country level, including engagement of a network of specialists.
- There is a need to support countries in terms of reviewing their capacities to respond to zoonotic events, learning from experience and applying best practices.

OIE wildlife health framework

Dr Sophie Muset, Ebola Project Lead Programme and Technical Coordinator, from the OIE Preparedness and Resilience Department, presented the OIE wildlife health framework. She started by reminding participants of the interconnection between the environment, wildlife and human health and pointed out that protecting wildlife health was essential for preserving our future. She stated that there was an urgent need to ensure wildlife health management, taking into account that: 1) 60% of emerging infectious diseases in humans have an animal origin and the majority of these (72%) are from wildlife; 2) wildlife is essential to keep Ecosystem up and running; and 3) there is increasing interaction at the human–animal–ecosystem interface. She indicated that the OIE was consequently developing a Wildlife Health Management Framework to promote wildlife health worldwide with a view to achieving One Health.

Dr Muset informed participants that the development of this framework would include the inputs received from a recent survey sent to OIE Members (151 responses received), which showed that Veterinary Services had a role to play in the health monitoring of wildlife trade and use and should be involved in the epidemiological surveillance of diseases in wildlife at the human–animal–ecosystem interface.

She explained that the two main priorities of the Wildlife Health Management Framework were: (1) to improve OIE Members' ability to reduce, anticipate, and manage the risk of pathogen emergence and transmission at the human–animal–ecosystem interface; and (2) to improve the capacity of OIE Members for early detection, notification and management of wildlife diseases. She stated that to achieve these objectives a coordinated set of actions would aim to: (1) raise awareness and knowledge of risk pathways and best practices in wildlife health management; (2) strengthen One Health multisectoral collaboration and capacity for wildlife health monitoring and management; and (3) enable the development of a political, policy and scientific environment that would allow the Veterinary Services to implement wildlife health monitoring and management. She stated that six work packages had been identified to support the achievement of the objectives. These work packages were integrated in the core activities of the OIE, namely: promotion of multisectoral coordination and collaboration; strengthening of the capacity for wildlife health management; improvement of the quality of data collection, reporting, analysis and use; development and update of guidelines, standards and risk reduction strategies; development and dissemination of scientific knowledge; and production and dissemination of awareness tools. Dr Muset concluded by highlighting the fact that there was currently no organisation whose work focused exclusively on wildlife, and she stated that the OIE and its partners should therefore make joint efforts to better address wildlife health issues so to maintain a healthy ecosystem and fully implement the One Health agenda; in this respect, a new international partnership was now needed to promote wildlife health in the context of One Health.

Following Dr Muset's presentation and some chat and poll interactive activities organised to better guide the discussion, the Regional Commission concluded that:

- Wildlife health management is important to Veterinary Services due to the direct interaction between wildlife health and human health. The spreading of diseases between wildlife and domestic animals poses great risks of many zoonotic epidemics and potential future pandemics. Additionally, wildlife can act as a reservoir of infection for domestic animal species, posing a risk to food security. In some countries, wildlife is also directly linked to tourism and is considered a national asset.
- Responsibility for the management of wildlife is normally outside the remit of the Veterinary Services and there is therefore a need to ensure good communication and collaboration with the relevant responsible services.
- Actively involving the Veterinary Services in managing wildlife health is key to ensuring the control and monitoring of potential new emerging diseases as well as existing zoonotic diseases, such as rabies. It is also an excellent opportunity to strengthen the role/engagement of OIE Focal Points for Wildlife.
- There are excellent examples of wildlife health interventions by Veterinary Services in Europe, such as vaccination against rabies and bovine tuberculosis, implementation of surveillance programmes for West Nile fever, control of ASF, monitoring of *Echinococcus*, management of wild boar populations, surveillance of vector-borne diseases and efforts to save endangered species.

- The work and support of the OIE on behalf its Members is key and should prioritise rabies eradication, emergency preparedness, TADs prevention and surveillance best practices and emerging disease control and monitoring.
- Controlling illegal trade of wild animals and promoting intersectoral collaboration with relevant agencies (such as CITES [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora]) is crucially important and strong cooperation with the relevant governmental bodies is key to better coordinate activities and taking the right actions regarding the wildlife health management.

Infection with SARS-COV-2 in animals

Dr Mariana Marrana, Chargée de mission, OIE Preparedness and Resilience Department, informed participants about the OIE's response to the COVID-19 emergency, the guidance issued by OIE Groups of Experts, and the latest epidemiological observations and research regarding SARS-COV-2 in animals. She stated that, in response to the COVID-19 emergency, the OIE had established command and control of science and intelligence work streams as a comprehensive approach to sharing information and coordinating and streamlining activities. The OIE's COVID-19 emergency-related guidance targeted at the public included the following: a Q&A, an OIE Technical Factsheet on Infection with SARS-CoV-2 in Animals, the Statement of the OIE Wildlife Working Group, and communications with videos and social media posts. She indicated that the OIE had developed a series of guidance documents for governments and Veterinary Services, including the following: guidance on Veterinary Laboratory Support to the Public Health Response for COVID-19; considerations on the application of sanitary measures related to COVID-19 for international trade; considerations for sampling, testing and reporting of SARS-CoV-2 in animals; guidelines for working with free-ranging wild mammals in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic; and guidelines on working with farmed animals of species susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2. Dr Marrana also presented the latest epidemiological observations and research on SARS-CoV-2 in animals, including the following: infection in mink; species susceptibility; potential intermediate hosts; zoonotic transmission; airborne transmission of SARS-COV and SARS-COV-2; and spill-back concerns. She emphasised the following points on SARS-COV-2 from an animal health perspective:

- The source of the human event may likely have been a spill over from an intermediate animal host between humans and animals.
- Animal studies have shown that ferrets, minks, cats, and racoon dogs can become infected and can transmit the virus. Initial studies indicate that the virus replicates poorly in pigs, dogs and cattle, and not at all in chickens and ducks.
- Mink, besides being susceptible and transmitting the virus to other minks, have reportedly transmitted the virus back to humans. Surveillance findings from The Netherlands and Denmark suggest that SARS-CoV-2 viruses introduced to mink populations from humans are evolving through viral mutation. These viruses have been shown to infect humans. This may have important public health implications, although the exact consequences are not yet known.
- SARS-CoV-2 infection can easily be missed in farmed mink populations if they are not closely monitored. Testing is important in these populations.

She concluded by emphasising that the OIE urged its Members to:

- Work closely with public health authorities.
- Closely monitor mink populations for SARS-CoV-2 infection and report any positive findings to the OIE as well as to relevant national authorities, including public health.
- Implement risk mitigation strategies to reduce the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission from humans to animals, as outlined in the OIE's guidance on the subject.

Following Dr Marrana's presentation and some chat and poll interactive activities organised to better guide the discussion, the Regional Commission concluded that:

- The guidelines developed by OIE on COVID-19 were essential and very useful.
- Members used them in a number of different ways, including as the basis on which to develop their own policies and guidelines, to do risk assessments, to coordinate activities with relevant national authorities, to share with the media as well as to post them on their own official websites, to provide guidance to private practitioners and responses to animal owners' concerns.
- It could be useful for the OIE to further develop COVID-19 emergency guidance for international trade of animal products and wildlife, as well as guidance regarding companion and stray animals.

SESSION 2: TECHNICAL TOPICS

Summary of the disease situation in the Region and progress on implementing the new OIE-WAHIS system

Dr Paula Cáceres Soto, Head of the OIE World Animal Health Information and Analysis Department, presented a summary of the status of animal disease notifications by Members in Europe, including the most relevant epidemiological events during the 2019-2020 period concerning three diseases: infection with SARS-CoV-2 in animals, African swine fever (ASF) and avian influenza (AI).

Dr Peter Melens, Deputy Head of the OIE World Animal Health Information and Analysis Department, reported on the progress on the implementation of the new OIE-WAHIS system. He noted that the renovation of WAHIS was approaching the finishing line and the new OIE-WAHIS platform would, after a delay, be going live in December 2020 or the beginning of 2021. He explained that the project sought to revitalise Members' reporting capacity and to facilitate access to and analysis of the data by all users. He described the platform's strategic objectives and provided an update on its progress, as well as on management activities during the transition to the new platform and after its launch. He said that the OIE was committed to giving open access to OIE-WAHIS data once they had been validated. He also confirmed that the OIE's role as steward of this type of data was to give open access to a strategic resource as a global public good, to enable the international regulatory and scientific community to consult and extract the data, combine it with data from a variety of other sources and analyse the data to help clarify and predict impacts on and prospects for animal and public health. He added that the OIE was also committed to interoperability and connectivity with national and regional systems, such as ADIS, the European Union's Animal Disease Information System, with the aim of simplifying data exchange, thereby avoiding inefficiencies stemming from duplicate data entry and transcription errors.

Following the presentation, the OIE Regional Commission for Europe noted that:

- Animal cases of infection with SARS-CoV-2 are still occasional, and the main driver of the current pandemic is linked to humans. However, it is important to collect and share all the available relevant information relating to animals to improve our understanding of the epidemiology of the disease and its public health implications.
- Member Countries are encouraged to report through WAHIS any occurrence of animal cases of infection with SARS-CoV-2 that comply with the case definition provided in the OIE guidelines. In addition to the known risks of transmission from humans to animals and back to humans, there are recent concerns surrounding the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection in wild animals and the potential for a reservoir for the virus becoming established in wildlife populations.
- With regard to infection with avian influenza, it was noted that it continues to pose a significant global threat to animal health and public health, with a recent increase in the number of reported outbreaks. The information provided by countries and territories in the Region demonstrates on one hand the high level of surveillance, allowing rapid detection of outbreaks with consequently a rapid response and application of measures for disease control and eradication, and on the other hand the active circulation of avian viruses in the Region.
- In particular, it is worth highlighting the level of surveillance of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in the Region in wild birds, with several countries implementing specific monitoring in wildlife. Surveillance of the disease in wildlife is of pivotal importance as it allows a better

understanding of the global epidemiological situation of the disease and the risk of spread to poultry.

- Countries and territories are encouraged to continue to report information on the circulation of AI viruses in the Region with a high level of spatial and quantitative detail.
- ASF: four countries in the Region reported the first occurrence of the disease and six countries reported the spread of the disease to new zones within the country. In 2019, two Members published self-declarations of freedom from ASF.
- Members are urged to comply with their transparency obligations and the requirements of the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* and to follow the recommendations of the regional Standing Group of Experts on ASF (SGE-ASF Europe) and the 15 recommendations listed in Resolution No. 33 adopted unanimously at the 87th OIE General Session, in May 2019.
- The OIE-WAHIS platform will provide users with more and better transparency, speedy notification, quality reports and, hence, better quantitative data.
- The main benefit of the new OIE-WAHIS system lies in making information available for risk analysis and monitoring the animal disease status of trading partners. It was noted that this benefit depended on transparency through timely disease notification by Members.
- Collaborative efforts by Members to provide high-quality, transparent, timely data will ensure the OIE's role as a data steward in the era of "Big Data". All this information will be extremely useful in developing appropriate animal health and veterinary public health policies for the public good.

AMR National Action Plans in the Region of Europe and the long-standing Tripartite partnership to combat AMR

Dr Mario Latini, Technical Assistant, at the OIE Sub-Regional Representation for Central Asia, provided a brief overview of the implementation of the current AMR action plans in the Europe Region and the preparation of future plans. He stated that recent records showed an improvement in the development of National Action Plans (NAPs) on AMR in the Region between 2016 and 2020. Currently, 89% of the countries had an NAP fully developed or under development.

Dr Latini also gave details of the implementation of the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Project for AMR in Tajikistan as a good example of the long-standing Tripartite partnership to combat AMR.

He stated that the main objectives of the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Project for AMR in Tajikistan, entitled "Combating the rising global threat of AMR through a One Health Approach", included the following: the legal assessment and identification of the priorities for a legal reform; implementation of AMR surveillance; strengthening of the capacity of laboratories; and dissemination of a wide information campaign. The two-year project was due to start in 2021.

Following Dr Latini's presentation and some interactive activities organised to better guide the discussion, the Regional Commission concluded that:

- The main problems are the selling of antibiotics without a veterinary prescription and the use of antibiotics as growth promoters.
- Poor legislation and the lack of awareness, communication and cooperation between stakeholders are also important factors affecting some Members.
- To help countries in the development and implementation of their NAPs, uniformity of the guidelines and cooperation between countries are key.
- Providing education, training, and awareness programmes to all stakeholders, and especially farmers, is the key to ensuring the successful implementation of an NAP.
- The cooperation and supported actions by relevant international organisations as well as the development of relevant legislation and governmental coordination are also essential in the fight against AMR.
- The involvement of Veterinary Services in wider AMR management, including in the reduction of antimicrobial use through animal welfare and biosecurity actions, is crucial for AMR control.

- The poll results on the second day clearly showed that “weak intersectoral coordination” was seen as the main challenge to implementing AMR action plans across the Europe and Central Asia countries (35% of participants). “Lack of funding” (22%) and “inadequate legislation” (20%) were issues that affected countries’ ability to achieve effective implementation of their NAP on AMR. Among the other issues, “human capacity” was a concern for only 15% of participants, and even fewer (7%) indicated concerns about “political support”.

Required competencies of Veterinary Services in the context of international trade: opportunities and challenges

Dr Francisco D’Alessio, Deputy Head of the OIE Standards Department, gave a summary of the work done for OIE 2020 Technical Item entitled “Required competencies of Veterinary Services in the context of international trade: opportunities and challenges”¹.

He briefly described the scope of the Technical Item, which included issues relating to the World Trade Organization agreements and OIE standards, the role of Veterinary Services, the applicable tools for building trade capacity, the Observatory on implementation of OIE standards, and online training tools developed by the OIE.

He ended by inviting the participants to review the document in detail (available online on the OIE website) and to take part in the online discussion forum dedicated to the 2020 Technical Item (accessible on the same web page).

The Observatory Project

Dr Karen Bucher, Project Manager, at the OIE Standards Department, presented a report on the OIE Observatory Project, which was designed to achieve a better understanding of the implementation of OIE international standards. She reminded participants that the starting point of the project had been Resolution No. 36 adopted by the World Assembly of Delegates at the 86th OIE General Session, which requested the OIE to develop an Observatory to monitor the implementation of its international standards, to increase transparency and to identify constraints and difficulties faced by Members. The Observatory should also allow an evaluation of the relevance, feasibility, and effectiveness of the standards for Members, as a basis to develop a more strategic focus to the OIE’s standard-setting and capacity-building work programmes. Dr Bucher stated that the work done so far had been based on the experience of 50 international organisations in effective international rulemaking and on the recommendations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for the establishment of the OIE Observatory.

Dr Bucher explained that the OIE considered the Observatory as a monitoring tool for continuous and systematic observation and analysis of Members’ practices regarding the implementation of OIE standards. She stated that the aim was to support Member’s engagement by conducting an evidence-based assessment of the use of OIE standards, providing tailored capacity-building to address identified challenges and promoting the benefits of implementing OIE standards. All this work would be carried out using a data-driven approach. She noted that it would contribute directly to two of the strategic objectives of the proposed OIE Seventh Strategic Plan, namely data governance and responding to Member’s needs.

Dr Bucher reminded participants that the Observatory was in its pilot phase (2020-2021), which included the delivery of four prototypes: Prototype 1. The 2020 Technical item: “Required competencies of Veterinary Services in the context of international trade: opportunities and challenges”; Prototype 2. Foot and mouth disease in the Americas; Prototype 3. Avian influenza in Europe; and Prototype 4. Pest des petits ruminants in Africa. Dr Bucher explained that the idea behind the prototypes was to test data collection, data analysis and data visualisation by using different sources of data (PVS Pathway, official disease status, self-declaration, WTO, International Trade Centre [ITC]), interviews with OIE Delegates or high-level government representatives of nine OIE Members, literature reviews (including *OIE Scientific and Technical Review* Vol. 39 (1)), and a data analytics application developed with the tool Qlik. She emphasised that the engagement of Members and key stakeholders was essential to ensure the success of the OIE Observatory. She informed participants that the main objectives of the pilot phase

¹ <https://www.oie.int/technicalitem2020>

were: 1) Sharing a common vision for the OIE Observatory; 2) Collecting feedback on the prototypes and engaging discussion on a future monitoring framework for the OIE Observatory; and 3) Engaging in a discussion on the governance of the OIE Observatory and the use of its outputs by other OIE programmes (PVS Pathway, OIE Training Platform, OIE standard-setting process) and global strategies.

Dr Bucher concluded by emphasising that, for several reasons, the Observatory was a challenging project. Firstly, the definition of implementation of OIE standards was particularly difficult to capture and interacted directly with the implementation of the WTO SPS Agreement. Secondly, the monitoring of implementation required a transparent and observable form of measurement. Thirdly, from an operational perspective, the OIE Observatory required a significant cultural change in data management on the part of the OIE. However, the Observatory had multiple expected benefits such as monitoring the use of OIE standards as a *sine qua non* condition to assess the implementation challenges and improve actions of the OIE over time. This should ultimately promote a wider uptake of OIE standards and demonstrate the value of an international rule-based system.

Implementation of the GF-TADs Action Plan in the region

Dr Bernard Van Goethem, Director, DG Health and Food Safety, European Commission, provided an overview of GF-TADs activities in the region during the past two years, particularly on the implementation of the current Action Plan. He also presented the coordination mechanism for the standing groups of experts for ASF, LSD and rabies, including the impact on the control of these diseases in affected or targeted countries. In particular he showed how useful the missions organised by the experts and the creation of the e-depository for ASF had been. He mentioned that the successful implementation of the plans had been due to the transparent manner in which countries had dealt with the problem and because of the strong engagement of CVOs and OIE Delegates in implementing the recommendations. He also explained the mechanism governing the Global GF-TADs, the priority diseases being tackled, and the changes forecast for the governance part which had been adopted by the Regional Core Group (RCG).

Following Dr Van Goethem's presentation and some chat and poll interactive activities organised to better guide the discussion, the Regional Commission concluded that:

- ASF prevention, ASF national instructions and preventive strategy, LSD vaccination, and containment of diseases and elimination of ASF and rabies (with oral rabies vaccination in wild carnivores) as well as use of the GF-TADs Handbook on African Swine Fever in wild boar are key elements that have immensely helped countries to be prepared for what the newly affected countries are currently battling.
- The experience gained in Europe under the GF-TADs has been very useful for quickly addressing ASF in Asia, as well as for the new dynamic of GF-TADs in the Americas.
- The current scope of diseases addressed by GF-TADs in Europe guarantees, through prioritisation, the reduction of risks.
- Close coordination and collaboration have been the key to success.

SESSION 3: REGIONAL COMMISSION INTERNAL DISCUSSIONS (CLOSED SESSION FOR DELEGATES ONLY)

Dr Maris Balodis, President of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe, presented several internal matters of relevance to the Regional Commission.

He began referring to the Technical Item (with questionnaire) entitled "Long distance transport of live animals: OIE standards and best practices including societal perception and communication aspects", which had been selected at the 87th General Session in 2019 to be presented during the 29th Conference. He noted that, owing to the virtual format adopted for the 29th Conference, it had been decided not to include Technical Items (due to the shortened agenda).

Dr Balodis consulted the Regional Commission on the Technical Item (with questionnaire) for the next Conference, and the Commission unanimously agreed to keep "Long distance transport of live animals: OIE standards and best practices including societal perception and communication aspects" as the

Technical Item (with questionnaire) to be presented during the 30th Conference of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe in 2022.

Regarding Technical Item 2 (without questionnaire), Delegates identified the following potential topics to be considered for the next Regional Conference:

- The impact of climate change in the control of vector-borne diseases (proposed by Albania).
- Veterinary medicine in apiculture: opportunities and perspectives (proposed by Italy).
- Veterinary services in the era of digitalisation (proposed by France).
- A global One-health approach to zoonoses: forecast, understand, mitigate and avoid. OIE scientific engagement and best practice in furthering zoonotic scientific research and sharing of big data (proposed by United Kingdom).

Dr Balodis encouraged Delegates to send more ideas for possible topics. The final decision on the topic to be addressed would be taken by the RCG a few months prior to the Regional Conference.

Next, Dr Balodis asked the Delegates present if any country wished to host the 30th Conference of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe. The Delegate of Italy reiterated his country's interest in hosting the next Conference in 2022. Italy's proposal was endorsed unanimously.

Dr Balodis also chaired a session devoted to the presentation and adoption (voting mechanism provided by the online Zoom platform) of documents developed by the OIE Regional Core Group for Europe, and the OIE Platform on Animal Welfare for Europe. The following documents were adopted unanimously by the Regional Commission:

- Terms of Reference and working mechanism of the Regional Core Group (RCG) of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe (proposed by the RCG);
- Adoption of Terms of Reference of the OIE Platform on Animal Welfare for Europe (proposed by the Animal Welfare Steering Group, endorsed by the RCG);
- Adoption of Terms of Reference of the National Contact Point on Long-Distance Transportation (proposed by the Animal Welfare Steering Group, endorsed by the RCG).

Finally, the President of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe declared the meeting officially closed wishing everybody good continuation in their activities.