Self-declaration by Belgium on the recovery of its freedom from bluetongue

submitted to the OIE on 24 May 2013 by Dr Pierre Naassens, Delegate of Belgium to the OIE, Director, Directorate-General for Policy Control, Animal Health and Animal Product Safety Division, Federal Food Safety Agency (AFSCA), Brussels, Belgium

Epidemiological background

The bluetongue virus (serotype 8), or BTV-8, was identified in Belgium for the first time by the National Reference Laboratory on 18 August 2006, coinciding with a period when the virus was also identified in other Northern European countries. The Belgian authorities sent the OIE an immediate notification on the same day. The disease spread rapidly throughout the country and Belgium was declared a restriction zone for serotype BTV-8.

The number of identified cases peaked in 2007. In 2008, a compulsory nationwide vaccination campaign against BTV-8 reduced the incidence of the disease significantly.

A total of 7,613 outbreaks were reported during this episode, affecting cattle, sheep, goats and deer.

No cases were detected in 2009 or in subsequent years.

Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of bluetongue outbreaks between 2006 and 2009.

It was not possible to determine how the bluetongue virus was introduced into Northern Europe. The spread of the virus in Belgium was facilitated by the presence of virus vectors (47 Culicoides species were identified between 2007 and 2010).

An epidemiological monitoring programme was established immediately after the emergence of the virus and is still in progress, to detect any resurgence of the disease in Belgium.

Legal provisions

Measures against bluetongue are regulated by the following European and Belgian legislation:

– the Animal Health Act of 24 March 1987
– the Royal decree of 25 April 1988 designating animal

Fig. 1
Epidemiological status of bluetongue in Belgium between 2006 and 2008
diseases subject to the application of Chapter III of the Animal Health Act of 24 March 1987
– the Royal decree of 7 May 2008 on bluetongue control and eradication
– the Ministerial order of 7 May 2008 on bluetongue vaccination.

Official measures
Vaccination using inactivated BTV-8 vaccines was compulsory in 2008, 2009 and 2010 for cattle (except veal calves) and sheep. In 2011, this became voluntary vaccination. Vaccination of goats and deer was voluntary.

An epidemiological monitoring programme was established immediately after the emergence of the virus. The programme is based on: testing by polymerase chain reaction and enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay in suspected cases (e.g. abortion); testing of young unvaccinated animals in sentinel herds; and entomological monitoring (i.e. capture and identification of insect vectors by traps scattered throughout the country).

No cases have been detected in Belgium since late 2008 and the epidemiological monitoring programme has demonstrated the absence of virus circulation in Belgian cattle since 2009.

There is an on-going programme of surveillance (compulsory notification, investigation of suspicions) and monitoring (annual testing of sentinel herds spread across the country) to identify and control any resurgence of the virus as quickly as possible. An entomological monitoring programme to monitor the presence of various disease vectors at risk sites (e.g. airports) is also in progress.

Based on the above, and on the fact that:
– more than three years have elapsed since the last case of bluetongue was detected in December 2008
– the cattle and small ruminant surveillance programme has revealed no sign of bluetongue virus circulation
– and, in accordance with Chapter 8.3., Article 8.3.3., of the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code (2012 edition);
the Delegate of Belgium to the OIE declares that his country recovered its freedom from bluetongue on 15 February 2012.