World Trade Organization SPS training for veterinary officials

Each year, the World Trade Organization (WTO) runs a series of training workshops on the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement. The goal of these workshops is to enhance the knowledge and expertise of government officials in developing countries to help them to understand and implement the provisions in the Agreement.

Each regional SPS workshop features a one-day ‘breakout session’, dedicated to the discussion of animal health, plant health or food safety issues, which is led by the OIE, the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) or the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex), as appropriate. The OIE breakout session is a great opportunity for participants from the Veterinary Services to analyse and discuss topics relevant to the OIE standards. However, relatively few veterinarians attend the WTO SPS workshops and this is a waste of an important training opportunity.

The purpose of this article is to explain the benefits for Veterinary Services of participation in the WTO SPS training workshops and to encourage future participation. This can help to improve market access and to facilitate safe trade in animals and animal products, through the application of the OIE standards in accordance with the principles in the SPS Agreement.

The WTO holds various training activities each year, including regional SPS workshops (held in various geographic regions); an Advanced Course on the SPS Agreement (held in Geneva); and a thematic workshop (also held in Geneva). These training activities range from intermediate level to advanced level. In addition to the OIE, representatives of the Secretariat of the Codex and the IPPC regularly participate as trainers in these activities. WTO Member and Observer governments can also organise national SPS training events and request that the WTO provide an expert trainer for these activities.

Interested government officials from developing or least-developed WTO Members and Observers, meeting the criteria for participation, may submit applications to the WTO for financial assistance to attend training activities. One of the prerequisites for participation in regional workshops and the Advanced SPS Course is completion of the WTO E-Learning Course on the SPS Agreement (see: https://etraining.wto.org).

Regional SPS workshops take place over four days. Staff of the WTO, the OIE, Codex, IPPC, Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) and other relevant bodies, such as regional economic communities, development banks and international donors, present lectures and practical exercises to illustrate key aspects of the SPS Agreement and the relevant international standards. In 2013, a regional SPS workshop for French-speaking African countries was held in Libreville, Gabon, and one for Arab countries was held in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates.

The WTO regional SPS workshops typically cover the following topics:

- the SPS Agreement: principles, requirements
- the role and activities of the SPS Committee and WTO SPS Secretariat
- the role and activities of the OIE, Codex and IPPC in relation to the Agreement
- transparency – how to implement the provisions of the Agreement and benefit from them

-- national experiences with market access – presentations of WTO Members/Observers
-- coordination at the regional and national level
-- technical assistance – best practices, experiences, support and financial assistance
-- SPS topics of current interest: e.g. the debate on private standards.

The three-week-long advanced SPS course represents the highest level in the WTO’s progressive learning framework. It is organised primarily to address SPS implementation issues in Member Countries, and targets government officials from WTO Member and Observer Countries. Applicants must have completed the online SPS E-learning course and should be working on SPS-related matters. This course features hands-on training and actively involves participants in SPS-related matters, ranging from addressing national SPS implementation issues to identifying SPS-related market access problems and developing strategies to overcome these. As part of the course, participants must develop an action plan to address implementation and/or market access problems in their own country and are required to report on their action plans at a subsequent follow-up session.

The thematic workshop provides a forum to discuss a specific SPS-related theme. This workshop is held back-to-back with the October meeting of the SPS Committee, to give participants the opportunity to also attend the Committee meeting and related activities.
Value of SPS training for veterinary officials

The WTO SPS training workshops provide an opportunity for networking at the regional and international level and for exchanging views with experts on trade and SPS issues from national and international organisations. These workshops can also be used to reinforce the knowledge and contacts obtained by participating in the OIE Focal Point training seminars.

Before each regional SPS workshop, participants complete a needs-assessment questionnaire which, among other things, invites participants to submit topics for analysis and discussion during the breakout session. For the OIE breakout session participants may propose a discussion on any topic relevant to animal health and trade, with a focus on the use of OIE standards to facilitate safe trade in animals and animal products.

Similarly, the Advanced SPS Course also features several technical sessions with representatives of the OIE, IPPC and Codex over a two-day period, where participants are exposed to the work of these organisations and are able to engage in technical discussions on animal health, food safety and plant health.

Unfortunately, relatively few veterinarians have attended a WTO SPS training activity in recent years and this is a missed opportunity to obtain valuable and relevant SPS-related experience. With this in mind, the WTO and the OIE have discussed how to increase veterinary participation in SPS training in future. The preparation of this article is one of the steps taken to encourage veterinarians to submit applications to attend a WTO SPS training activity in 2014. In addition, it has been agreed that some OIE regional staff will be given the opportunity to attend WTO regional SPS workshops. These trained officials will help to disseminate information about the training courses in their regions. Furthermore, OIE Headquarters will establish direct contact with the national OIE Delegate of the host country in the three-to-four weeks before the workshop is held, to encourage veterinarians in the host country of each workshop to attend the OIE breakout session (even if they cannot attend the entire course).

The WTO and the OIE hope that these actions will improve veterinary participation in the WTO regional SPS workshops. This can help to improve market access and to facilitate safe trade in animals and animal products, through the application of the OIE standards in accordance with the principles in the SPS Agreement.

WTO SPS Technical Assistance Activities in 2014

Detailed information on the WTO SPS training activities scheduled for 2014, including eligibility criteria, deadlines and application forms, is available on the SPS Technical Assistance gateway at: www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/sps_e/events_e.htm.

Information on the 2014 activities is as follows:

- Advanced Course on the SPS Agreement (in Spanish): Geneva, Switzerland, from 6 to 24 October
- Thematic SPS Workshop (in English, French and Spanish): Geneva, Switzerland, week of 13 October (topic to be confirmed)
- Regional SPS Workshops:
  - Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus (in English): Vienna, Austria, from 8 to 11 September
  - Latin America (in Spanish): Montevideo, Uruguay, from 11 to 14 November
  - Pacific countries (in English): date and venue to be confirmed.