Management of animal health emergencies: general principles and legal and international obligations

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Summary
The Eighth Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade led to the creation of the World Trade Organization and to the adoption of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement, thus considerably changing the rules of international trade in animals and animal products. Animal health measures may result in trade restrictions, but governments accept that these restrictions may sometimes be necessary and appropriate to ensure food safety and animal health protection. The SPS Agreement acknowledges the rights of governments to adopt measures to protect human, animal and plant health.

To ensure effective animal health protection, without unjustifiable discrimination, the operational procedures of Veterinary Services must be standardised, especially those concerning disease notification, epidemiological information, certification for international trade and management of animal health emergencies. Veterinary Services must be further supported by a proper legislative framework and adequate financial resources.

Keywords

Introduction
The conclusion of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Rounds with the adoption of the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) of the World Trade Organization has markedly changed the rules of the international trade in animals and animal products (6).

Animal and plant health measures, by their very nature, may result in trade restrictions. All governments accept the fact that some restrictions of trade may be necessary and appropriate to ensure food safety and animal and plant health protection. Governments, however, are sometimes persuaded to go beyond what is needed for health protection and to use animal and plant health restrictions to protect domestic producers against free economic competition. A sanitary or phytosanitary restriction which is not actually required for health reasons can be an effective protectionist device and, because of its technical complexity, a particularly deceptive and difficult barrier to challenge. The SPS Agreement builds on previous GATT rules to restrict the use of unjustified animal and plant health measures to protect trade. The basic aim of the SPS Agreement is to ensure that the sovereign right of a government to provide the level of health protection considered appropriate is not abused for protectionist purposes and does not result in unnecessary barriers to international trade.
The SPS Agreement recognises the rights of governments to adopt measures to protect human, animal and plant health, as long as these measures are based on scientific knowledge, are indeed necessary to protect health and do not unjustifiably discriminate against suppliers. Governments will continue to determine the food safety and animal and plant health protection levels in their countries.

The SPS Agreement encourages governments to 'harmonise' legislation, that is, to base their national protection measures on internationally recognised standards. Such standards, however, are often so stringent that many countries have difficulty in implementing them at the national level.

Once a country has decided on acceptable levels of risk, there are often a number of alternative measures which may be applied. The SPS Agreement requires that a government use those measures which cause the least hindrance to trade.

**Transparency**

Governments are required to notify other countries of any new or changed animal health measures which affect trade, and to establish offices to provide information on new or existing measures. Governments must also be open to scrutiny on how such food safety and animal and plant health regulations are applied. Known as 'transparency', this usually also promotes better enforcement of these regulations at a national level. In addition, it protects the interests of consumers, as well as those of trading partners, from hidden protectionism and barriers to free trade.

The Office International des Epizooties (OIE) promotes the development and periodic review of standards, guidelines and recommendations concerning animal health measures.

To promote effective protection of animal health, it is necessary to standardise the procedures of all Veterinary Services in the following areas:

- disease notification
- the provision of epidemiological information
- certification for international trade
- the management of animal health emergencies.

Furthermore, Veterinary Services must be supported by a proper legislative framework and adequate financial resources.

**Notification and epidemiological information**

**Office International des Epizooties**

The primary function of the OIE is to inform governmental Veterinary Services of the occurrence and evolution of animal epidemics which could endanger animal and human health.
- species and numbers of susceptible animals
- number of cases of the disease
- number of deaths and slaughtered and destroyed animals
- description of the affected population which could include information on the type of breeding and herd management practices involved
- name of the diagnostic laboratory and tests performed
- name of the causal agent
- origin and mode of spread of the disease and other epidemiological details
- control measures implemented.

**Follow-up reports**

This form must be used at least once in the seven days following the submission of the emergency report form. It is not necessary to send other follow-up report forms if the epidemiological situation evolves rapidly. No more than four follow-up reports should be sent to the OIE Central Bureau for each disease occurrence. Member States should send any additional information using the monthly report.

The follow-up report form should include the following information:
- follow-up report identification number and report date
- country in which the outbreaks occur
- details of the notifying officer
- date of notification
- name of the disease
- disease code
- geographical location of the outbreak
- number of outbreaks identified
- description of the affected population which could include information on the type of breeding and herd management practices involved in the new outbreaks
- name of the diagnostic laboratory and tests performed
- name of the causal agent
- origin and mode of spread of the disease and other epidemiological details
- control measures implemented.

**Monthly reports**

The monthly report form must be sent to the OIE, providing information on the absence, presence or evolution of List A diseases. In addition, it includes findings concerning diseases which are not in List A if these findings are of epidemiological importance to other countries. In the case of enzootic diseases, only this form should be sent. If, during the period covered by the monthly report, disease outbreaks have been notified to the OIE on the emergency report form and/or on the follow-up report form, this information must also be included in the monthly report summary.

The monthly report form should include the following information:
- report date
- country in which the information was collected
- details of the notifying officer.

For each disease notified, the following information must be given:
- disease status
- number of new outbreaks during the month
- total number of outbreaks during the month.

For each species susceptible to each different disease, the following information is required:
- number of animals present in the outbreak
- number of new cases
- number of deaths and slaughtered and destroyed animals.

The Central Bureau of the OIE will disseminate all the information received on the report forms to the Veterinary Services of other countries. This will be done by fax, electronic mail, OIE Disease Information or the OIE Bulletin.

A joint Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), OIE and World Health Organization questionnaire on OIE Lists A and B and FAO List C diseases will be submitted to the OIE at the end of the year. Data contained in these questionnaires will be published in the OIE World Animal Health.

**European Union**

The ability to gather and rapidly disseminate information concerning outbreaks of infectious diseases in List A is a prerequisite for the efficient management of a veterinary emergency.

This need has been recognised by the European Union (EU), leading to the implementation of a computerised system to record any notification of an infectious disease and to distribute that information to other Member States. The aim of this program, which is called the Interactive Data Entry System (IDES) and was first used in 1984, is to improve the management of the information flow between Member States on the subject of notifiable animal diseases. The IDES system requires that data on the new outbreaks be transmitted to the other Member States by telex, and that coded disease information on each subsequent outbreak in a Member State be transmitted by modem.

In addition to OIE List A diseases, Member States must also be notified of any outbreak of enterovirus encephalomyelitis (Teschen disease), infectious haematopoietic necrosis or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, according to the IDES protocol.
The information required by the IDES framework is the same as that required by the OIE forms, and is standardised by using a specially developed coding system.

Italy
Notification of infectious diseases is mandatory for the following:
- veterinarians
- animal owners, keepers and handlers
- deans of the School of Veterinary Medicine
- directors of veterinary and animal breeding institutes
- the military authorities concerned with animals in the armed forces
- port authorities
- airport authorities
- railway stationmasters
- the police force
- animal rangers
- the administrators of animal protection bodies.

Mayors are responsible for municipality health matters and must be notified of every suspected or confirmed case of a contagious infectious disease. Once notified, they must inform the local Veterinary Services, which must then ascertain the diagnosis and adopt all measures needed to extinguish the outbreak.

The Mayor must also inform the regional authority, which will quickly instigate appropriate disease control measures, which may involve more than one municipality.

Every suspected or confirmed case of an OIE List A disease, enterovirus encephalomyelitis, infectious haematopoietic necrosis or bovine spongiform encephalopathy must immediately be communicated by telephone to the Ministry of Health by the local Veterinary Service.

A telegram must subsequently be sent with the following information:

a) information to be transmitted at the time of first notification:
- time and date of notification
- name of the disease
- type of agent
- date of confirmation
- geographical location of the affected premises
- number of suspected cases, specifying the number of animals slaughtered per species and the number of carcasses destroyed per species for bovines, swine, sheep, goats and poultry

b) information to be transmitted when restrictive measures are lifted, following the eradication of the last outbreak:
- time and date of notification
- name of the disease
- date on which the restrictive measures are lifted.

Certification for international trade
The fundamental aim of the *International Animal Health Code* of the OIE is to facilitate international trade in animals and animal products through the detailed definition of the minimum health guarantees required of trading partners, to avoid the risk of spreading animal diseases from one country to another (5).

The international trade in animals and animal products depends on a combination of factors which should be carefully examined to ensure free trade, without incurring unacceptable risks to human and animal health.

An exporting country should be prepared to supply the following information to importing countries:
- information on the animal health status and national animal health information system of the exporting country, to determine whether that country, or the relevant zone of that country, is free of List A or List B diseases. This information should include all regulations and veterinary procedures in force to maintain a disease-free status
- regular and prompt information on the occurrence of infectious diseases
- details of the ability of the country to apply measures to control and prevent List A diseases and, where appropriate, List B diseases
- information on the structure of the Veterinary Service and the authority which it exercises
- all relevant technical information, such as that related to laboratory testing or to vaccines used in all or part of the national territory.

Certification requirements stated by the Office International des Epizooties
Importing countries should observe the rules given below.

Certification requirements should be imposed only for reasons of health control. It must be demonstrated that these requirements are necessary either to avoid the risk of transmission of one or more diseases or to reduce such a risk to an acceptable level.

Certification requirements should be exact and concise, and should state the requests of the importing country clearly. For this reason, consultation between the Veterinary Administrations of both the importing and exporting countries prior to actual movement of the commodity is useful. In fact, direct contact between Veterinary Administrations allows the requirements of the importing country to be defined exactly. This, in turn, means that clearer instructions can be issued to both the veterinarians who sign the export certificates and those staffing the frontier posts of
the importing country, so that misunderstandings can be avoided as far as possible.

Certification should be based on the highest possible ethical standards. The most important of these standards is that the professional integrity of the certifying veterinarian must be respected and safeguarded, particularly in regard to complete independence.

It is essential that no additional specific matters which cannot be accurately and honestly signed by a veterinarian be included in the requirements.

Certification of freedom from disease which is based on purely clinical freedom and on herd history is of limited value. This is also true of diseases for which there is no specific diagnostic test, or where the value of the test as a diagnostic tool is limited.

International trade involves continuing ethical responsibilities. If, after exportation, the Veterinary Authority of an exporting country becomes aware of the appearance or reappearance of a disease in a herd from which animals have been given international certification, within the normal incubation period of that disease, that Authority must then notify the importing country. This will enable the imported stock to be inspected and tested, and appropriate action can then be taken to limit the spread of the disease if it has been introduced. If a disease appears in imported stock, the Veterinary Administration of the exporting country should be informed so that an investigation can be conducted in the herd(s) of origin. The Veterinary Administration of the importing country should be kept informed of the results of the investigation, since the source of the infection may not be the exporting country.

European Union
In regard to importing animals from countries outside the EU (so-called 'Third Countries'), the EU requires compliance with standards equivalent to those applied to trade between EU Member States.

For example, the certificate concerning bovines that originate in Third Countries must be issued within the 24 hours preceding the shipment of the animals and is valid for 10 days, according to Annex III of Commission Decision 98/372/EC (3). This certificate must contain the following information:
- competent issuing authority
- country of destination
- number of animals
- origin of animals
- destination of animals
- means of transportation
- identification of animals
- health information.

The area of origin of the animals must have been free from foot and mouth disease (FMD) for at least the preceding 24 months. In addition, the area of origin must have been free from rinderpest, contagious bovine pleuropneumonia, vesicular stomatitis and bluetongue for at least the preceding 12 months. No vaccination against any of these diseases can have been performed during the previous 12 months and no FMD-vaccinated animals can have been imported. The animals must have been born in the territory named as their area of origin. If they were imported into that territory during the preceding 6 months, their country of origin must comply with the same animal health control standards met by the exporting country.

At the time of certification, animals must:
- not show any symptoms of disease
- not be vaccinated against FMD
- come from herds which are not subject to restrictive measures due to tuberculosis, brucellosis, enzootic bovine leukosis, mastitis or any other infectious disease.

Furthermore, the herds of origin must be completely free of the following:
- anthrax within the last 30 days
- brucellosis within the last 12 months
- tuberculosis and rabies within the last 6 months.

During the 30 days prior to shipment, each animal must be kept on premises which are located in an area free of FMD infection to a diameter of 20 km. Animals must be kept in isolation from the time of the first laboratory test up to the time of departure. The owner or animal keeper must declare that the animals have not undergone illegal hormone treatments.

The transportation of the animals must comply with the international approved standard for live animal transportation.

Management of animal health emergencies: general principles stated by the European Union and their application in Italy

General principles stated by the European Union
In 1991, the European Union required all Member Countries to cease the use of vaccines to control the spread of FMD.

Subsequently, the criteria to be applied in the preparation of national contingency plans for an FMD outbreak were defined in Commission Decision 91/42/EEC (2). According to this
Directive and the guidelines prepared by the Veterinary and Zootechnical Legislation Division of the European Commission, contingency plans must meet the following criteria:

a) a team which is responsible for the national co-ordination of all disease control measures in the country must be created
b) a list of all local centres capable of managing FMD should be compiled
c) detailed information on the personnel involved in disease control measures should be provided
d) the local control centre must be able to contact quickly those people and organisations which must be directly or indirectly involved if an outbreak occurs
e) suitable equipment and the materials necessary to conduct the proper procedures for disease eradication must be readily available at all times
f) detailed instructions on the measures to be implemented in case of a suspected or confirmed outbreak of disease, including instructions on the disposal of carcasses, should be provided
g) training programmes to develop and maintain the necessary professional skills should be conducted
h) diagnostic laboratories must be provided with the necessary equipment for post-mortem examinations, serological and histology tests, etc. Personnel should have their skills continuously updated to provide efficient diagnosis. A rapid means of transporting samples must also be provided
i) exact instructions on the quantities of vaccine to be used in the case of an FMD emergency should be given
j) the national government must provide a legislation framework which allocates the necessary powers and responsibilities to the appropriate organisations for the implementation of the contingency plan.

Financial aspects
Council Decision 90/424/EEC (1) provides funding in the case of an outbreak of one of the following diseases:

- rinderpest
- peste des petits ruminants
- swine vesicular disease
- bluetongue
- enterovirus encephalomyelitis
- avian influenza (fowl plague)
- sheep pox and goat pox
- Rift Valley fever
- lumpy skin disease
- African horse sickness
- vesicular stomatitis
- Venezuelan equine encephalomyelitis.

This Decision also defines financial measures related to funding specific veterinary activities, such as emergency measures against FMD. The decision also provides support for general veterinary control measures and animal disease surveillance and control plans. Member States can obtain funds for disease eradication if the following measures are taken:

- susceptible animals are slaughtered
- contaminated foodstuffs and materials are destroyed
- animal premises are cleaned and disinfected
- protection and surveillance areas are created
- proper animal health control measures to avoid the spread of infection are implemented
- an appropriate interval is respected before restocking
- appropriate compensation is awarded to animal breeders.

Directives related to animal health emergencies in Italy
These EU Directives were integrated into Italian legislation with the ‘National Contingency Plan for the control of foot and mouth disease and other Office International des Epizooties List A diseases’. This Plan defines the administrative and operational procedures to be implemented in the management of a disease emergency.

The Plan requires the creation of detailed contingency programmes which take into account national, regional and local operations and which describe the following:

- the organisation overseeing national, regional and local operations, detailing the responsibilities, tasks and functions to be conducted at each level during both emergency and non-emergency periods
- all existing knowledge and information on the disease control and productivity status of the territory concerned, as well as on its commercial status and infrastructure, which will be necessary to manage the emergency properly
- all necessary equipment, tools, materials and personnel and ways in which to provide them. Particular care must be taken in identifying appropriate and humane means of animal slaughter, and rendering plants and/or other suitable sites for the destruction and/or burying of animals, taking into account all relevant environmental factors.

This National Contingency Plan is activated at the regional level by implementing the procedures contained in the Manual to be used if an outbreak of an OIE List A disease occurs. The Manual provides veterinarians with detailed written procedures to be complied with in the case of an epidemic. These describe, step by step, all the actions which must be performed, from the moment when the suspicion of the occurrence of disease arises, to the moment when the infection has been eradicated and all disease control restrictions can be lifted. The Manual also describes the tasks and responsibilities of personnel and contains all the
necessary forms for the management of the outbreak. Table I lists all the subject areas contained in the index of this Manual.

Table I
National Contingency Plan for the control of foot and mouth disease and other Office International des Epizooties List A diseases: Index of the Manual

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Conclusion

Morse defines emerging diseases as infections which have either newly appeared in a population or which already exist but which are showing a rapid increase in incidence or geographic range (4). This definition is applicable to any infectious disease which becomes a problem in a particular area. At present, it seems that emerging diseases are increasing throughout the world. The consensus is that the emergence of so many new diseases over the last few decades is not accidental but can be attributed to a number of factors inherent in a densely populated, highly mobile and environmentally disrupted world. Most authors agree on the fact that factors involved in a disease emergency concern some form of altered 'viral traffic', that is, the spread of an agent into a new population. This infiltration is usually attributed to the following:
- the physical movement of agents into a susceptible population
- the crossing of a species barrier
- a major change in lifestyle
- some form of environmental disruption.

All of these factors, in addition to the definition of an emerging disease, can be applied to any animal health emergency.

Although modern Veterinary Services have access to far more advanced technologies than those available in the past, these Services still face major problems. Changes in the livestock industry, such as the rapid transportation of animals over long distances, and the concentration of livestock in large intensive units, are conducive to outbreaks of exotic diseases which can occur unexpectedly, hundreds or thousands of kilometres from previously infected areas, and to the rapid spread of such diseases, giving rise to major epidemics.

A combination of factors has increased the risk of epidemics, as follows:
- the decreasing incidence and distribution of many major epidemic diseases and the often subsequent suspension of vaccination. As a consequence, there has been an increase in susceptible populations and, moreover, a very rapid increase in cases where the disease is not recognised when it first strikes a population
- the increasing mobility of both human and livestock populations, partly due to developments in world trade, but also as a result of social and political upheavals
- a shortage of resources for controlling disease and for implementing adequate control campaigns.

Moreover, an increasing number of animal diseases which were previously endemic in most industrialised countries have been or are in the process of being eradicated. Their possible reoccurrence (due to international trade) has potentially catastrophic economic consequences. The costs of such reoccurrences are not comparable with those faced in the past, when these diseases were endemic.

Emergency preparedness refers to the proven capability to perform the following:
- to detect rapidly the introduction or sudden increase in the incidence of any livestock disease which has the potential to develop to catastrophic proportions. To this end, a suitable network of diagnostic laboratories is essential. These laboratories should be strategically located at both central and regional levels.
to adopt without delay the measures needed to contain and eliminate the disease in the shortest possible time, or at least to return the country to its former favourable disease status. Documented evidence of the results achieved is necessary. Suitable systems of identification of herds and animals are absolutely necessary to manage an emergency efficiently. Whenever possible, geographical information systems should be used.

In short, emergency preparedness comprises the abilities both to gain early warning of a disease outbreak and to react rapidly.

Gestion des urgences zoosanitaires : principes généraux et obligations légales et internationales

R. Marabelli, G. Ferri & S. Bellini

Résumé
Le huitième cycle de négociations de l’Accord général sur les tarifs douaniers et le commerce a abouti à la création de l’Organisation mondiale du commerce et à l’adoption de l’Accord sur l’application des mesures sanitaires et phytosanitaires (Accord SPS), ce qui a sensiblement modifié les règles des échanges internationaux d’animaux et de produits d’origine animale.

Les mesures prises en santé animale peuvent se traduire par des restrictions aux échanges, mais les États admettent que ces limitations sont parfois nécessaires et justifiées pour garantir la sécurité alimentaire et la protection de la santé animale. L’Accord SPS reconnaît aux États le droit d’adopter des mesures visant à protéger la santé des hommes, des animaux et des plantes.

Pour assurer une protection efficace de la santé animale, sans discrimination injustifiée, les procédures opérationnelles des Services vétérinaires doivent être normalisées, notamment celles concernant la notification des maladies, l’information épidémiologique, l’établissement de certificats destinés aux échanges internationaux et la gestion des urgences zoosanitaires. Les Services vétérinaires doivent, par ailleurs, disposer d’un cadre juridique approprié et des ressources financières adéquates.

Mots-clés
Gestión de emergencias zoosanitarias: principios generales y obligaciones legales e internacionales

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Resumen
La Octava Ronda del Acuerdo General sobre Aranceles Aduaneros y Comercio culminó con la creación de la Organización Mundial del Comercio (OMC) y la adopción del Acuerdo sobre la aplicación de medidas sanitarias y fitosanitarias (Acuerdo SPS), lo que trajo consigo cambios considerables en las normas que regían el comercio internacional de animales y productos de origen animal. Aunque las medidas zoosanitarias pueden traducirse en restricciones comerciales, los gobiernos aceptan que a veces tales restricciones pueden ser necesarias y oportunas para garantizar la inocuidad de los alimentos y la protección sanitaria de su población animal. El Acuerdo SPS reconoce el derecho de los gobiernos a adoptar medidas destinadas a proteger la salud de los seres humanos, los animales y las plantas. Para asegurar una protección efectiva de la sanidad animal sin caer en discriminaciones arbitrarias, es necesario estandarizar los procedimientos operativos de los Servicios Veterinarios, especialmente en lo que atañe a la declaración de enfermedades, la información epidemiológica, la certificación para el comercio internacional y la gestión de emergencias zoosanitarias. Es preciso, además, que los Servicios Veterinarios trabajen en un marco legislativo adecuado y gocen de los recursos financieros necesarios.

Palabras clave

References