Veterinary services across the world play a key role in the response to recurrent and new challenges as they are responsible for monitoring the onset of emerging and re-emerging diseases in animals that may then spread to humans and of ensuring that appropriate actions are taken in a timely manner. Viral diseases, in particular, may emerge frequently because of the very variable nature of the viral genome, and may be, more frequently than in the past, identified in a timely manner thanks to new diagnostic techniques. All this requires full awareness and preparedness so that proportioned actions are taken depending on the seriousness of the emerging disease, ranging from drastic measures to less severe ones.

The EU perspective on the role of veterinary services in managing diagnostics is reflected in the EU Animal Health Strategy. At its heart is the notion that “prevention is better than cure” and its goals are to ensure a high level of public health and food safety; to support farming and the rural economies; to improve economic growth, cohesion and competitiveness; and to promote farming practices and animal welfare while minimising environmental impacts. The Animal Health Law is one of the main deliverables of the strategy for a modern and innovative legal framework supporting the achievements of the above goals. The Commission’s proposal for the new Animal Health Law will soon be discussed in the European Parliament and the Council in view of its formal adoption in accordance with EU procedures. Major changes are foreseen to the current animal health legislation that aim to deliver a more effective and modern legal framework, to increase the flexibility and proportionality of rules established in some cases more than 40 years ago and, overall, to better meet the needs of citizens and businesses.

In my presentation I will discuss some of these key elements and notably the role played by the veterinary services in using veterinary laboratories to obtain swift and reliable diagnostic support when investigating suspected outbreaks or when communicating and acting on a confirmation of an outbreak of a relevant disease.

The action of the veterinary services takes place within the context set up by the EU legislation (notably the upcoming Animal Health Law), the OIE international standards and trade framework of the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement). It is therefore essential to acknowledge that these newly available diagnostic techniques will likely lead to the detection of previously unknown viruses and disease agents all over the world, which may or may not have a significant impact on animal or human health. This situation represents a crucial test for the international community to demonstrate that any country that follows international standards and acts within the spirit of the SPS Agreement will not be unduly penalised. It is therefore fundamental that the scientific community continues to perform its research activities, with its traditional transparent approach, without having to consider the implications that each new finding might have on international trade.