



77th Annual General Session
of the International Committee
of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)

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OIE President, Dr Barry O’Neil, address to the Opening Ceremony

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, delegates, invited observers, colleagues and friends, once again it is a great honour as President of the OIE International Committee for me to welcome you to the opening ceremony of another General Session. This meeting while being the highlight of the OIE year also brings to a conclusion a significant programme of work that has happened since we meet in Paris last year. It’s also a special year in that we as an organisation are celebrating our 85th anniversary this year, from our establishment in 1924.

I must begin by thanking you for your ongoing support to the OIE, and considering the current financial challenges facing the world it is particularly pleasing to see that so many people have made the real effort to participate.

Over the year I have once again been privileged to be with many of you in regional and technical meetings, and I continue to be impressed by the commitment you have to improving the animal health and welfare situations in your countries and regions, and for your support to the OIE.

I especially want to thank the Governments and Veterinary Services of Lithuania, Cuba and Chad who during the year hosted regional commission meetings for their regions of Europe, America’s and Africa, all of which were highly successful and enabled greater focus of OIE’s efforts within these regions, and for more regional coordinated approaches to disease control.

In addition during the year we had 2 very successful international conferences, and I thank the Government of Egypt for hosting the 2nd OIE Global Conference in Animal Welfare in Cairo, and also the Government of Argentina for hosting the OIE 2nd International Conference on Animal Identification and Traceability in Buenos Aires.

The financial crises has reaffirmed to me that the OIE model for an international organisation is exactly what our members expect and need, with minimal centralised administrative bureaucracy, and partnering with our members National experts along with their scientists within OIE approved reference laboratories and collaborating centres to achieve the results we do.

And on behalf of all OIE members I would like to thank the small but very dedicated and hard working staff of the OIE Central bureau and our 9 Regional and Sub-regional offices for their exceptional efforts for another year, and who have led the significant work effort in implementing the business plans that we adopted last year.

Another thing that the financial crises highlights to me is that in such times international organisations must continue to be absolutely relevant and add value to our members by showing the required leadership and achieving the results in their areas of accountability which in OIE's case is as being the only international organisation that is solely dedicated to animal health and welfare. My assessment is that OIE has and continues to be absolutely relevant, and achieve significant benefits for our now 174 members.

The OIE wants to continue to show leadership to assist our members in preparing for future challenges, and I believe the development of the 5th strategic plan will enable the OIE to better focus its efforts on priority areas. One of the important challenges into the future is food security, and only one year ago due to exceptional commodity prices some of our members were having real concerns about the ability to feed their populations. Thirty percent of the world's population suffers from some form of malnutrition, and over 3 million people die needlessly each year because of malnutrition related illnesses in developing countries.

While commodity prices have come down significantly in the last 12 months, we must collectively ensure we are implementing agriculture policies, and this includes bio-fuel policies, that will achieve greater certainty of production and supply and therefore stability in food commodity prices, in order to feed not only the existing, but also the growing population into the future.

While the world is producing more than 1,000 million tonnes of meat, fish and dairy products every year, a trend that has happened over the last 25 years is the actual component of meat and dairy products traded as a percentage of total agricultural trade has fallen by one third. Interestingly over this same time the percentage of aquaculture products traded has risen by over 100%, and some studies have predicted that by 2050 half the animal protein consumed by people will come from aquaculture.

During the last 25 years meat production has increased by over 100% to reach 260 million tonnes, but during the same time the world's population has doubled from 3 billion to 6 billion people. To feed an estimated 9 billion people at some stage during this century, the production of animal products will have to continue to increase at similar rates, and yet with restraints and challenges on production that exist in the world today, unless things significantly change we are likely to have a continuing deficit of food compared to demand, and therefore high food commodity prices.

Environmental sustainability is an area of ever growing importance and when we consider livestock production the main areas being highlighted are water availability and usage, methane emissions from ruminants, effluent and animal waste disposal, nitrogen use and phosphorous availability longer term, and last but not least animal welfare.

Significant research is underway internationally to find improved livestock production systems that have less impact on the environment, and while in some situations do need to see improvements in this area, we also need to ensure we are involved in future policy decisions so that livestock can continue to be farmed in an economically sustainable way.

There is of course a balance that must be maintained, and while historically we may not have always paid sufficient attention to environmentally important areas, we cannot now overcompensate and as a result trade off economic sustainability so that animal production becomes uneconomic, which would result in food commodity prices becoming even more unaffordable to many in the world.

Animal welfare is an extremely important issue to the OIE and for our members, our societies and consumers alike. Animal welfare also has to be the most challenging public policy issue that policy makers and regulators deal with as it covers a complex relationship involving scientific, ethical cultural, traditional, societal, religious, and economic dimensions.

And while we in the OIE believe that animals are an essential part of our society, whether that be as a companion, draught or production animal, we also believe that those who own or manage animals have an obligation to provide good welfare situations for the animals under their care. There is no excuse for any of us not to do the very best within our abilities to provide for the welfare of animals under our care, and it is most concerning that we are still seeing animal welfare situations and practices in both developed and developing countries that have no place in today's world.

It is particularly concerning for me to see situations still happening where animals are being slaughtered whether that is for human consumption or disease control purposes, in inhumane ways. Humane slaughter of animals is not difficult to achieve, and should be essential components of all animal production systems in every country.

And while I'm very pleased that the OIE has been able to develop and have our members adopt much needed animal welfare standards, the fact is that as 174 OIE members we have very different situations domestically, and therefore we have very different realities of animal welfare within our countries. As OIE members it is up to us to ensure implementation and compliance with OIE standards, and while I hope and believe that we are all at different stages of the same animal welfare journey, we must all increase our efforts to ensure that animal welfare situations are either acceptable or being improved, and that we don't condone the unnecessary suffering of animals.

I'm very pleased that Climate change is the technical topic being presented at this weeks meeting. Climate change will increasingly cause problems for livestock farmers in the world, whether that is through heat related diseases and stress, extreme weather events, emergence or re-emergence of infectious diseases especially vector borne diseases, and the need to adapt livestock production systems to be able to exist in a different environment.

There is much to be done in order to minimise the impacts that a changing climate and environment will have on our livestock, and so I look forward to the recommendations coming from this week's technical presentation, so that the OIE can focus greater efforts into this area.

I would like to complement the work that has been done by the various experts over the last 12 months in preparing a significant number of new and revised standards for us to consider for adoption this week. Our standards must be based on the very best science that is available, and they must also be developed and updated in a timely manner. Very few international organisations have the ability like the OIE does to harness the world's best experts and scientific advice in order to develop draft standards, and then present them for adoption by our members in a transparent and yet timely manner.

And as chair this week I will be doing my very best to ensure that only when science justifies a proposal will a standard be considered for adoption, and conversely that we won't be considering for adoption standards that have their basis in "political science".

The OIE by establishing standards for surveillance and disease control along with requirements for rapid disease notification, and transparent mechanisms for disease freedom recognition is a very relevant organisation to our future challenges. It has been estimated that animal diseases cause wastage of up to 20% of available animal protein that would be available if our animals were disease free, along with the increased productivity that comes from healthy animals.

In a globally connected world we also need the ability to trade safely, and without the OIE standards members would have huge difficulty in importing animals and animal products safely.

Our activities cover many disciplines, and while historically most of the OIE effort went into livestock diseases, we are now putting equal efforts into aquaculture, wildlife, animal welfare, animal production food safety, diagnostics, biologicals and veterinary remedies, and importantly leading efforts in building the quality and capacity of our members' veterinary services.

With the increasing importance of aquaculture production in the world today I'm very pleased with the progress that has been made in establishing OIE standards for disease surveillance, control and safe trade in this area.

There are many other important responsibilities of the OIE that are not always recognised, such as the work that is done on bee diseases. Over the last few years, disease threats to our bee populations have continued to increase, and in addition we have seen large die offs of bee colonies in both North America and Europe. Yet it is an absolute fact that our arable, pastoral, horticultural and vegetable production systems are nearly totally dependent on bee pollination for their very existence, and therefore we must put increasing effort into protecting our bee populations into the future.

Another area of OIE's work that also is not well known is our informal mediation process that is available for when there are disputes between two members on animal health matters relating to international trade. I encourage members to make use of this facility, so the worlds best experts can assist in finding an acceptable science based outcome. Unfortunately this mediation process has only been used on a few occasions, which to me is most disappointing, as the trade related disagreements either don't get resolved which results in relationships between the parties becoming even more strained, or alternatively the issue ends up escalating to the longer, and very expensive formal WTO disputes mechanism.

During the course of this week we have not only important technical work and the adoption of various animal health and welfare standards, but also a number of equally important administrative matters. These include the revision of the basic texts that modernises the wording used along with rationalising the previous complicated and dated rules of the organisation to enable greater clarity for our members and a more efficient basis for the OIE to operate under. I hope members will absolutely agree that the proposal sent to you is a very significant improvement of what currently exists and I look forward to our consideration and the adoption of these at our Friday session.

In addition as I've already mentioned will also be seeking further clarification from you as to where the OIE needs to focus greater effort as we develop the 5th strategic plan.

We have included in your folders an outline and summary of where the Administration Commissions discussions have progressed, and we look forward this week to your input that we can then take into consideration in finalising and presenting to you the new strategy for adoption at next years General Session.

I have already covered some of the areas that need to be reinforced within the new strategy, but another area that we must develop further is putting the concept of “one world one health” into practice. The current human influenza outbreak involving a novel influenza strain that has arisen from reassortment of human, swine and avian influenza viruses has reinforced that if we are going to succeed in preparing for and responding to the many new and re-emerging zoonotic risks that involve both animal and human interaction, our animal health and public health authorities at both the National and International level must work closer together in collaboration and partnership.

We need to make sure we don't continue to talk about “one world one health” as a theoretical concept, but rather put greater effort into making it a reality in our respective countries, and at the international level.

Another administrative matter happening this week at the end of our meeting is our 3 yearly elections for the various technical and commission office holders. This is a very important event in the OIE's calendar as the success of the OIE very much depends on the quality of experts on these groups. Our goal as always is not only to achieve fair regional representation from our 5 regions, but also to appoint the best expertise that is available from our members to serve on these groups. My thanks to all the people who have held elected positions over the last 3 years, and to those who are standing for election or re-election my best wishes.

The elections this week will also bring to a completion my 3 years as President of the OIE International Committee, and I would like to thank all OIE members and OIE staff for their support during this time. I would especially like to thank Dr Bernard Vallat our Director General, who has worked tirelessly during my time as President in making the OIE the modern, responsive and effective organisation it is today. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude for the contribution that he has made, and continues to make to the OIE.

I also would like to recognise and thank my colleagues on the Administration Commission for their commitment to OIE and their support, and for working positively through at times some very difficult issues in order to find solutions that will be acceptable for our 174 members.

While I have been extremely pleased with the progress we have together made during my time as President, there are however some areas that I believe more progress and effort needs to occur and I would like to briefly cover these before I close.

As an international organisation we must ensure we are fully aligned with other international organisations whose efforts overlap with our own, especially with the FAO, and the WHO. We must ensure that we are not duplicating effort, and equally that we have aligned our related efforts to achieve a bigger outcome than either of us could achieve working in isolation.

While all the organisations have made considerable effort into improving the situation, I don't believe we have achieved the desired state as yet, and therefore challenge the 3 organisations, and this includes the OIE, to put more commitment into aligning our respective efforts rather than duplicating or working in isolation.

The second area I would like all OIE members to do better with is the acceptance of science based standards, and ensuring that we both support the adoption of standards that are based on the worlds best available science, and that we don't get captured into arguing and demanding "political science" results. We then need to ensure we are using our adopted science based standards both domestically as well as when we are trading regionally and internationally.

As a case in point, the emergence of AH1N1 influenza saw responses from many countries as they implemented policies to mitigate the associated risks, and unfortunately in a number of cases the measures related to pigs or pig products that were put into effect where not justified.

I believe the OIE moved rapidly to advise its members of the situation and what measures needed to be taken, as well as what measures were not justified, but unfortunately some OIE members didn't follow this advice and this risked unduly alarming consumers and confusing the public in general, as well as adding unnecessary lost opportunities and costs related to trade.

As OIE members and in most cases WTO members we have committed to implementing science based approaches and to implementing OIE standards, unless there is sound science based on a member's unique situation to justify another action. We must make greater efforts and be more committed to only respond to new disease events in a way that is consistent with the risks and science involved.

The last area I would like to see OIE members embrace more readily is agreeing to respond in a way that is proportionate to the risks that are involved. We all accept that it is not possible or desirable to take a zero risk approach to any event, as the reality is zero risk is an impossible goal, and yet some of the approaches we see at times reflect an apparent desire to try and achieve a zero risk outcome.

BSE is I think a good example of this, and I will mention a recent study of the costs of BSE measures in the Netherlands that showed as the disease risks decrease, we should have been revising the OIE standard to ensure it was still proportionate to the risk involved, rather than maintaining an excessive and very expensive compliance regime that wasn't justified.

The Netherlands study found that the BSE food risks changed from 17 human life lost years in 2002, to fewer than 3 lost years in 2005, whereas the cost of the BSE measures in million's of Euros per life saved increased from 4 to nearly 18 over the same time period. Producers, consumers and tax payers faced costly risk management procedures that were disproportionate to the risks involved, and that were also inconsistent with efforts put into saving human lives in other areas or risk.

The conclusion that the study reached was that while precautionary based approaches are justified in the face of a new unknown risk, such as was the case once with BSE, these approaches however should also include consideration of cost effectiveness in order to ensure the measures are proportionate to the relative risks as there are many other risks in life and we should try and put equal effort where risks are similar.

We also must be more accepting of the need to review such standards on a regular basis and agreeing that precautionary measures that may have been taken do need to be relaxed as new science allows for uncertainties to disappear and risks become quantifiable, and therefore ensuring our standards are focused on where the risk actually exist based on new science as it becomes available.

We will never achieve compliance with our standards if we force members to implement unaffordable and unnecessary approaches, and in the process we will loose the credibility of not only our members, but also our farmers and ultimately consumers.

I wish you well for the week ahead and for a successful meeting, and my thanks to you all for your participation and attention.

Barry O'Neil

President of the OIE International Committee