

13TH CALL OIE AD HOC GROUP ON COVID-19 AT THE ANIMAL-HUMAN INTERFACE

2nd March 2021

Participants: Billy Karesh (Chair OIE Wildlife Working Group), Thomas Mettenleiter (OIE CC, Germany), Dirk Pfeiffer (Hong Kong City University), Andrea Ellis (CFIA, Canada), Casey Barton Behravesh (OIE CC, USA), Jane Rooney (USDA-APHIS, USA), Jean-Claude Manuguerra (OIE CC, France), Misheck Mulumba (OIE CC, South Africa), Hiroshi Kida (OIE CC, Japan), Ottorino Cosivi (PANAFTOSA/PAHO-WHO), Arjan Stegeman (University of Utrecht, Netherlands) Karl Stahl (SVA, Sweden), Sten Mortensen (SSI, Denmark), Ann Cullinane (OIE CC, Ireland, and OIE BSC), David Robertson (Centre for Virus Research, University of Glasgow, UK), Noel Miranda and Aim Prasarnphanich (FAO RAP), Sean Shadomy and Etienne Bonbon (FAO), Stephane de la Rocque and Peter Ben Embarek (WHO), OIE Preparedness & Resilience, Science, Standards and WAHIAD Departments.

Agenda

1. Update on SARS-CoV-2 events in animals
2. Update on animal-human-environment interface related research and animal/wildlife surveillance work
3. AOB

Meeting notes

1. Update on SARS-CoV-2 events in animals

USA: a cougar was found to be infected with SARS-CoV-2, a new susceptible animal species. Large cat sanctuaries are a setting of potential new cases of animal infection with SARS-CoV-2.

2. Update on animal-human interface related research and animal/wildlife surveillance work

Netherlands: the research study that was analysing samples collected from wild animals from around mink farms has been concluded. All samples from wild animals (weasels, foxes, etc.) were found to be negative. The only positive samples were from mink that had escaped the farm.

The group took advantage of the presence of two members of team that went on the WHO-led mission to investigate the origins of SARS-CoV-2 to ask questions about the process, findings and next steps. It was noted that there are no significant fur farming operations in Hubei province (fur farming is concentrated in the north of China) and that none of the early human cases appeared to be linked to fur farms. One of the recommendations made by the team, and in line with OIE and FAO recommendations, was to perform active surveillance in fur farms. With respect to species of farmed wild animals that could be susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2, meat from some of these animals was sold at Huanan market (e.g. rabbit, ferret-badger (in the mustelid family), racoon dog). Sampling of animals and animal products sold in Huanan market after its closure on 31 December 2019 did not reveal evidence of SARS-CoV-2. Although the exposure source of individuals with a link to Huanan market remains unknown, the virus could have been introduced to the market through infected human(s), contaminated animals or animal products, possibly frozen.

Whilst some of the earliest known cases of COVID-19 were linked to Huanan market, other cases were not. Some early COVID-19 cases did not have a link with any market whilst some other cases had exposure to other markets.

Knowing that Huanan market is a retail and wholesale market and it therefore supplies smaller markets, should it be the case that there were animals infected with SARS-CoV-2 in Huanan market, these could have been sent into smaller retail markets.

The possible link to the cold-chain environment was mentioned. Experts highlighted the importance of making a clear distinction between the risk posed by frozen meat from infected wild animals and other cold chain products which were more likely to act as fomites following surface contamination. Frozen meat from animals which had been infected with SARS-CoV-2 would likely have a higher viral load (more significant) than other cold products which had surface contamination and would therefore be less significant. Findings of surface contamination of frozen goods with SARS-CoV-2 is an extremely rare event. The group noted their concern with the growth of illegal online sales of wildlife products as a result of the ban on selling wildlife for food in markets. It was also noted that using wildlife products in traditional medicine is permitted. However, these products are less likely to carry pathogens, since traditional medicines go through processing that would eliminate them.

It was noted that the surge in pork prices due to ASF-related culling could have driven more wildlife entering the human food chain. The following study which looks into the matter was referred.

<https://www.preprints.org/manuscript/202102.0590/v1>

A representative of the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific joined the call to inform the group on FAO's support to active surveillance of wild and domestic animals for SARS-CoV-2 infection. FAO is available to support local surveillance and investigation of risk pathways.

3. AOB

Considerations from the OIE *ad hoc* Group on Safe Trade in Animals and Animal Products about the risks associated with mink pelts will be published within the next two weeks.

WHO is organising an open webinar about the use of trained dogs for screening COVID cases, which will take place on Monday 8th March.

The next call of this AHG shall be scheduled on a need-basis.