

Ad hoc Group on the evaluation of peste des petits ruminants (PPR) status and endorsement of official control programmes of Members

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17 to 19 October 2023

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A virtual meeting of the *ad hoc* Group on the evaluation of peste des petits ruminants (PPR) status and endorsement of official control programmes for PPR of Members (hereafter the Group) was held from 17 to 19 October 2023.

1. Opening

Dr Montserrat Arroyo, Deputy Director General for International Standards and Science of WOA, welcomed the Group. She thanked the experts for their availability and contribution to the work of WOA and extended her appreciation to their employers for allowing their participation in this meeting. Dr Arroyo acknowledged the amount of work before, during and that would be done after the meeting in reviewing the dossiers and drafting a detailed report on the assessment. Dr Arroyo thanked the Group for its contribution to this important mandate of WOA.

Dr Arroyo highlighted the importance of the quality of the report to be scrutinised by Members before adopting the proposed list of countries free from PPR. She also encouraged the Group to continue providing detailed feedback to applicant Members with a negative outcome in identifying the main gaps and points for improvement to achieve their desired PPR-free status, as well as providing informative recommendations to those Members with positive outcomes for further improvement in maintenance of their PPR-free status.

Dr Arroyo highlighted the sensitivity and confidentiality of the dossiers for official recognition and thanked the experts for having signed the updated forms for undertaking of confidentiality. She also mentioned that if any members of the Group had any conflict of interest in the evaluation of a dossier, the expert(s) should withdraw from the discussions and decision making of the particular application.

The experts and WOA welcomed Dr Asma Kamili as a new member of the Group.

2. Adoption of the agenda and appointment of Chairperson and Rapporteur

The Group was chaired by Dr Michael Baron and Dr Giancarlo Ferrari acted as rapporteur, with the support of WOA Secretariat. The Group endorsed the proposed agenda.

The Terms of reference, agenda, list of participants are presented as Appendices 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

WOA and the Group reviewed the declared interests, and it was agreed that none represented a potential conflict in evaluating the application at this meeting.

3. Evaluation of applications from a Member for official recognition of PPR-free status

Azerbaijan

In August 2023, Azerbaijan submitted a dossier for the official recognition of its PPR-free status based on historical grounds. The Group requested additional information and received clarifications from Azerbaijan during the evaluation of the dossier.

i. Animal disease reporting

The Group noted that Azerbaijan had a record of regular and prompt animal disease reporting to WOA and that PPR was a notifiable disease in the country as per legislation since 2006.

The Group further noted that an awareness programme was in place for PPR targeting different stakeholders, such as small ruminant producers, livestock keepers, farmers, and veterinary professionals and paraprofessionals. The Group acknowledged Azerbaijan's efforts to engage its relevant stakeholders with its plan to have its PPR-free status officially recognised by WOA by using different occasions (e.g., vaccination campaigns, agricultural shows, meetings with farmer associations) to disseminate training material on the clinical signs, modes of transmission, economic impact, and prevention of PPR.

Although PPR had been a notifiable disease since 2006, the Group took note of documented evidence of only recent years substantiating an early warning system for PPR. Noting the PPR epidemiological context in the region, with the disease being endemic for many years in some of Azerbaijan's neighbouring countries, the Group expected documented evidence of an early warning system for PPR for a longer period. Nevertheless, the Group appreciated that Azerbaijan had identified this gap and had been implementing activities to reinforce passive surveillance over the past two years, which led to a drastic increase of PPR suspect cases notified by

farmers or veterinarians during routine farm visits. The Group agreed that these cases were followed up by proper field and laboratory investigations.

The Group commended Azerbaijan for the significant improvement of the early warning system over the last two years and recommended that Azerbaijan maintain this enhanced awareness programme going forward.

ii. Situation of PPR in the past 24 months

The Group noted that PPR had never been reported in the country. Based on the findings of the enhanced passive surveillance and the active surveillance for PPR in place (*cf.* sections *i.* and *iv.*), the Group concluded that PPR was absent during at least the past 24 months.

iii. Veterinary Services

The Group acknowledged that in 2021, Azerbaijan had finalised the development of the Animal Identification and Registration System (AIRS) for identification at the individual level and registration of cattle, horses, and small ruminants under the framework of a project implemented in collaboration with an international resource partner. The Group noted that this system had been piloted in cattle in a specific region in April 2023 and was initiated for small ruminants in 2023, with about 3% of the total small ruminant population having been individually identified by the time of the submission of Azerbaijan's dossier. The Group further noted that Azerbaijan aimed to fully identify sheep and goats in the country by 2026. In the meantime, small ruminants were identified at the herd level and registered by rayons; records were updated by the staff of Animal Health and Veterinary Services Centres on several occasions, e.g., visits to farms for vaccination campaigns.

The Group commended Azerbaijan for the significant progress towards developing an integrated animal identification and traceability system and considered that the system used until the finalisation of this new project seemed adequate. However, the Group expressed some concerns about the effective implementation of the current traceability system in place for small ruminants because a major discrepancy had been observed between the numbers of imported small ruminants reported by Azerbaijan in its dossier and the statistics provided to other international bodies (FAO, World Bank) and in news sites¹ as coming from the State Statistics Committee (*cf.* section *v.*). Azerbaijan attributed this inconsistency to a possible failure of information flow among the Veterinary Services and the State Statistics Committee. The Group appreciated that Azerbaijan had initiated an investigation to clarify this issue and recommended that Azerbaijan prioritise the integration of small ruminants in AIRS, enabling tracing back of possible PPR suspect cases.

The Group further noted that small ruminant movements within and between rayons required the issuance of a veterinary certificate by a veterinary inspector from Azerbaijan's Food Safety Agency (AFSA) indicating information on farm registration and herd identification. Such certificates were also mandatory for seasonal migration. The Group took note of the nine veterinary checkpoints established along the seasonal migration routes throughout the country for conducting clinical examinations of animals and ensuring that they are accompanied by appropriate documentation.

iv. Surveillance for PPR in accordance with Articles 14.7.27. to 14.7.33. and with Chapter 1.4.

The Group acknowledged that, in addition to passive surveillance, Azerbaijan had been implementing since 2020 active surveillance for PPR, which included a) countrywide (including Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic) cross-sectional serological surveillance, which in 2023, evolved to a risk-based survey with a two-stage sampling frame designed to detect a between-village prevalence of 1% in high-risk areas and 2% in low-risk areas with 95% confidence and a within-village prevalence of 20%, b) the use of serum samples collected for other purposes (i.e., serological surveillance for brucellosis) and testing them also for antibodies against PPR using the aforementioned design prevalence and c) wildlife surveillance using a questionnaire filled by key stakeholders in national parks. In addition, from January to July 2023, serological and clinical surveillance were conducted on a monthly basis in sentinel herds designated in high-risk areas using the same design prevalence as in the case of the risk-based cross-sectional survey. The Group noted that a small number of PPR-positive serum samples had been detected during these surveillance activities, which would fall within the expected normal range of the test [1- specificity] and considered that they were followed up by an appropriate protocol to

¹ https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2023/5/free/economics_news/en/4799.htm

exclude PPR virus infection. The Group appreciated that Azerbaijan was planning to maintain the enhanced passive and sentinel surveillance in place.

The Group noted that laboratory diagnosis of PPR was carried out at the Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL), which was formally accredited by ISO 17025. The Group further noted that CVL had participated in 2023 in a proficiency test for PPR diagnostic methods organised by a WOAHA Reference Laboratory for PPR.

The Group concluded that a comprehensive surveillance system for PPR was in place in Azerbaijan.

v. *Measures to prevent the introduction of PPR in particular regarding the importations of small ruminant commodities*

The Group acknowledged that Azerbaijan had good knowledge of potential routes of transboundary animal movement and was implementing strict controls over cross-border movements through Border Inspection Posts strategically located at ports, airports, and land borders across the country.

The Group took note of the PPR contingency plan in place, which had been approved in January 2022, and tested through a simulation exercise organised in July 2022 involving all relevant stakeholders, including farmers, private veterinarians, laboratory workers and staff from the Veterinary Services.

The Group further noted that, during the past 24 months, Azerbaijan had imported large numbers of small ruminants from few countries not officially recognised by WOAHA as free from PPR. The Group acknowledged that the vast majority of these animals were intended for direct slaughter. However, the Group found statistics available in the public domain as coming from Azerbaijan's State Statistics Committee, according to which the volume of imported small ruminants was much higher than the one reported in the dossier (*cf. section iii.*). In response to a question raised by the Group, Azerbaijan confirmed that, prior to an import of live animals, an electronic application had to be submitted by the importing company to AFSA with information on the type and volume of animals to be imported, the transportation route, the point of entry into the country and the quarantine station approved by AFSA. Upon verification of this information by AFSA, an import permit was issued in AFSA's Automated Food Safety Information System (AFSIS), and this information was automatically transferred to the Unified Automated Information System (VAIS) of the State Customs Committee, as these two systems are operating in an integrated manner. Azerbaijan indicated as the most probable cause for the inconsistency observed is the fact that, until the digitalisation of the import procedure for live animals in 2022, imports were documented in paper format which may have resulted in a failure of information flow between the Veterinary Services and the State Statistics Committee. The Group appreciated that Azerbaijan initiated an investigation to clarify this discrepancy and requested Azerbaijan to provide an update on the outcome of this investigation when reconfirming its PPR status in November 2024.

From the dossier and the additional evidence provided, the Group noted that the provisions for imports of small ruminants either for breeding or slaughter from countries without an official PPR-free status by WOAHA required that imported animals originated from premises where no case of PPR had been reported in the past 24 months; were subjected to quarantine for 21 days in the exporting country; had not been vaccinated against PPR; and had to be tested negative for PPR either by ELISA or PCR. The Group concluded that the provisions for imports of small ruminants from countries without a PPR-free status officially recognised by WOAHA were compliant with Article 14.7.10. of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)*.

vi. *Absence of vaccination against PPR and no entry of vaccinated animals in the past 24 months*

The Group acknowledged that vaccination against PPR had never been carried out in Azerbaijan, PPR vaccines had never been imported into the country, and no cases of illegal vaccination against PPR had been detected. The Group noted that importing animals vaccinated against PPR was prohibited, including those intended for direct slaughter since 2020.

vii. *Compliance with the questionnaire in Article 1.12.1*

The Group agreed that the dossier was compliant with the format of the questionnaire in Article 1.12.1. and commended Azerbaijan for the clearly written and well-structured dossier.

Conclusion

Considering the information submitted in the dossier and the answers received to the questions raised, the Group considered that Azerbaijan's application was compliant with the requirements of Chapter 14.7. and Article 1.4.6. of the *Terrestrial Code*. The Group, therefore, recommended that Azerbaijan be recognised as a country free from PPR.

The Group commended Azerbaijan for the progress achieved in many areas, particularly with regard to enhancing the passive and active surveillance for PPR, the development of the identification and traceability system, the international quality standards achieved by the laboratory performing PPR diagnosis and the cost-effective strategy to include serum samples collected for other purposes in the PPR serological surveillance.

4. Evaluation of an application from a Member for the official recognition of a PPR-free zonal status

The Group assessed a request from a Member for the recognition of its PPR-free zonal status. Based on the final recommendation of the Scientific Commission concluding that the application did not meet the requirements of the *Terrestrial Code*, the dossier was referred back to the applicant Member.

5. Evaluation of an application from a Member for the endorsement of its official control programme for PPR

The Group assessed a request from a Member for the endorsement of its official control programme for PPR. Based on the final recommendation of the Scientific Commission concluding that the application did not meet the requirements of the *Terrestrial Code*, the dossier was referred back to the applicant Member.

6. Recommendations for the importation of small ruminants from countries or zones infected with PPRV destined for slaughter

In response to a request from the Scientific Commission for Animal Diseases (the Commission), the Group had drafted, during its 2022 meeting, provisions on imports of small ruminants from countries or zones infected with the PPR virus destined for direct slaughter. The Commission discussed the proposed draft article at its February 2023 meeting and noted that domestic pigs and wild boar could be considered as possible PPR virus reservoir hosts, according to scientific evidence suggesting that suids² were an unexpected possible source for PPR virus infection. Considering that implementation of the draft article could result in potential imports of infected animals in a free country and based on the fact that the PPR virus could survive in meat, the Commission requested the Group to further clarify the role of meat in the transmission of PPR virus and propose amendments to the draft article accordingly.

The Group clarified that PPRV could survive in fomites, such as meat, tissues, and blood, which could be a possible source of transmission within an abattoir; this is why a recommendation for thorough cleansing and disinfection of vehicles and the slaughterhouse/abattoir immediately after use was included in the draft article. Nevertheless, once the meat entered the market chain, the risk of PPR virus transmission was not higher than in the case of meat imported from a PPR-infected country, for which the *Terrestrial Code* does not foresee specific provisions. With regard to the scientific evidence suggesting that suids could be a possible source for PPR virus infection, the Group highlighted that to date only one paper published in 2018 presented such data based on transmission trials, where pigs could transmit the PPR virus to contact goats and pigs after being intranasally inoculated with a highly virulent PPR virus strain. No further studies have been published since then confirming this observation in the field. In addition, although the PPR virus is now widespread in countries with a large pig population (e.g., China), there have been no field reports of PPR-like illness in pigs. In light of the above, the Group was of the opinion that there was insufficient scientific evidence to suggest that meat could play a role in transmitting the PPR virus through pigs. Therefore, the Group did not propose any amendments to the draft article.

7. Adoption of the report

The Group reviewed and amended the draft report. The Group agreed that the report would be subject to a short period of circulation to the Group for comments and adoption. Upon circulation, the Group agreed that the report captured the discussions.

.../Appendices

² Schulz C., Fast C., Schlottau K., Hoffmann B., Beer M. (2018). Neglected hosts of small ruminant morbillivirus. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 24, No. 12

Appendix 1 Terms of reference

VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE *AD HOC* GROUP ON EVALUATION OF PPR STATUS AND ENDORSEMENT OF OFFICIAL CONTROL PROGRAMMES OF MEMBERS 17 to 19 October 2023

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Purpose

The purpose of the *ad hoc* Group on the evaluation of peste des petits ruminants (PPR) status of Members (the Group) is to evaluate applications for official recognition of PPR status and for endorsement of PPR official control programme of Members. In addition, the Group is requested to discuss and address the feedback by the Scientific Commission for Animal Diseases ([Scientific Commission](#)) to the draft provisions for 'Recommendations for importation from countries or zones infected with PPRV, destined for slaughter' proposed by the 2022 *ad hoc* Group on the evaluation of PPR status of Members.

Background

In accordance with the [procedure for official recognition of animal health status](#), Members can be officially recognised by WOAHA as having a PPR-free status or an official PPR control programme endorsed by WOAHA through the adoption of a resolution by the World Assembly of Delegates (the Assembly) in May every year. A Member wishing to apply for the official recognition of its PPR-free status or for the endorsement of its official control programme for PPR by WOAHA should complete and submit the relevant [questionnaire](#) laid out in Chapter 1.12. of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)* and comply with all requirements specified in the *Terrestrial Code*. The Scientific Commission is responsible for undertaking, on behalf of the Assembly, the assessment of Members' applications for their compliance with WOAHA standards. The assessment carried out by the Scientific Commission is based on the recommendations formulated by a relevant *ad hoc* Group. *Ad hoc* groups are convened under the authority of and report to the Director General.

Specific issues to be addressed

The Group will evaluate Members' applications in detail on their compliance with the requirements specified in the *Terrestrial Code* and *Terrestrial Manual* for PPR. Based on the evaluations, the Group will provide its conclusions and recommendations to the Scientific Commission.

Prerequisites

The Group members should:

- Sign the Undertaking on Confidentiality of information (if not done already);
- Complete the Declaration of Interest Form;
- Understand that the membership of the Group may be retained between its meetings to ensure continuity of the work.

Actions to deliver

Before the meeting

Upon reception of an application from a Member, the Status Department (SD) conducts a preliminary screening to check the conformity of the dossier (structure of the dossier in accordance with the SOP and with the questionnaire under Chapter 1.12. of the *Terrestrial Code*, main sections of the questionnaire, regular notification to WOAHA, payment of the fee, Performance of Veterinary Services (PVS) report, etc.). If an information gap is identified, the SD requests additional information from the Member.

As the PVS reports are bound by the rules on confidentiality of information of the WOAHA, the SD and experts will consider for the evaluation the available PVS report(s) if not obsolete (PVS reports from more than five years ago) or confidential.

The SD will send the working documents to the Group, including the dossiers received from applicant Members, at least one month before the Group meeting (i.e., **18 September 2023**).

The experts can request support from the SD at any time.

The SD suggests the nomination of a Chair and Rapporteur for the Group's consideration.

The SD can suggest a preparatory meeting with the Chair, the Rapporteur or all experts to address specific points in advance, if needed.

The experts are expected to:

- Be familiar with Chapters [1.12](#), and [14.7](#), of the *Terrestrial Code* and the PPR Chapter of the *Terrestrial Manual*;
- Evaluate and study in detail all dossiers provided by WOAAH;
- Take into account any other information available in the public domain that is considered pertinent for the evaluation of the dossiers;
- Summarise the dossiers according to the *Terrestrial Code* requirements by completing the summary tables provided by the SD (the summary tables will be provided at a later stage along with the working documents for the meeting). Experts are expected to capture and summarise in each corresponding section of the summary table the main gaps as well as strengths identified during the assessment of the dossiers, using extracted texts or reference to pages/annexes from the application;
- Draft questions to the applicant Members whenever the analysis of the dossiers identifies incomplete or unclear information;
- Submit to the SD the completed summary tables for each application together with possible questions for the applicant Members at least 10 days before the teleconference and preferably by **6 October 2023**;

The SD will compile the summary tables and the questions to be forwarded to the applicant Members before the teleconference. All subsequent information and material provided by a Member will be forwarded to the Group.

During the meeting

- Agree on the appointment of the Chair and Rapporteur of the meeting (the Chair will lead the discussion and the Rapporteur will ensure that the report reflects the discussion and captures the detailed assessment of the dossiers);
- Mention any potential conflict of interest and, if relevant, withdraw him/herself from the discussion;
- Contribute to the discussions;
- Provide a detailed report in order to recommend, to the Scientific Commission, the Member(s) and/or zone(s) to be recognised (or not) as free from PPR and/or the official control programme for PPR to be endorsed by WOAAH and to indicate any information gaps or specific areas that should be addressed in the future by the applicant Members.

If during the teleconference the Group decides that additional information should be requested from an applicant Member before an informed conclusion can be drawn, the SD can request it and forward the additional information to the Group at a later date. The Chair is responsible for coordinating the finalisation of the assessment and for ensuring that the views of all members of the Group are taken into consideration.

Should the Group not be able to complete its Terms of Reference during this meeting, experts' contributions will be solicited after the meeting, including by teleconference if needed.

After the meeting

The SD will circulate the draft report after the teleconference is over. Experts are expected to contribute to the finalisation of the report within approximately one week.

The SD will circulate the final version of the report to the Group once endorsed by the Scientific Commission and is published online.

Deliverables

A detailed report to recommend to the Scientific Commission whether an applicant Member(s) should be (or not) recognised with an official PPR-free status or have an official control programme for PPR endorsed by WOAAH. The report should indicate any information gaps or specific areas that should be addressed in the future by the Members. In addition, clear explanation to address the comment by the Scientific Commission regarding draft provisions for importation from countries or zones infected with PPRV destined for slaughter proposed by the 2022 ad hoc Group on the evaluation of PPR status of Members and proposal of an updated draft text if relevant.

Reporting / timeline

WOAH will circulate the draft report no more than seven days after the teleconference (no later than 26 October 2023) and the Group will finalise its report within ten days (indicative deadline: 6 November 2023).

Appendix 2 Agenda

VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE *AD HOC* GROUP ON THE EVALUATION OF PPR STATUS AND ENDORSEMENT OF OFFICIAL CONTROL PROGRAMMES OF MEMBERS

17 to 19 October 2023

AGENDA

1. Opening
 2. Adoption of the agenda and appointment of Chair and Rapporteur
 3. Evaluation of applications from Members for official recognition of PPR-free country status
 - Azerbaijan
 4. Evaluation of an application from a Member for official recognition of a PPR-free zone status
 5. Evaluation of an application from a Member for the endorsement of its official control programme for PPR
 6. Recommendations on importation of small ruminants from countries or zones infected with PPRV, destined for slaughter
 7. Finalisation and adoption of the report
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Appendix 3 List of Participants

AD HOC GROUP ON THE EVALUATION OF PPR STATUS AND ENDORSEMENT

OF OFFICIAL CONTROL PROGRAMMES OF MEMBERS

17 to 19 October 2023

List of Participants

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