

# ***Ad hoc* Group on the evaluation of African horse sickness (AHS) status of Members**

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**World Organisation  
for Animal Health**  
Founded as OIE

Status Department  
[disease.status@woah.org](mailto:disease.status@woah.org)

12, rue de Prony  
75017 Paris, France

T. +33 (0)1 44 15 18 88  
F. +33 (0)1 42 67 09 87  
[woah@woah.org](mailto:woah@woah.org)  
[www.woah.org](http://www.woah.org)

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A virtual meeting of the *ad hoc* Group on the evaluation of African horse sickness (AHS) status of Members (hereafter the Group) was held on 28-29 September and 5 October 2023.

## **1. Opening**

Dr Montserrat Arroyo, Deputy Director General for International Standards and Science of WOAHA, welcomed the Group. She thanked the experts for their availability and contribution to this work and extended her appreciation to their institutes and national governments 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 writing the report. Dr Arroyo thanked the Group for its contribution to this important mandate of WOAHA.

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 AHS. She also encouraged the Group to continue providing detailed feedback to applicant Members with negative outcomes in identifying the main gaps and points for improvement to achieve their desired AHS-free status, as well as providing informative recommendations to those Members with positive outcomes for further improvement in the maintenance of their AHS-free status.

Dr Arroyo reminded the Group about the sensitivity and confidentiality of the dossiers for official recognition and thanked the experts for having signed the forms for undertaking of confidentiality.

The experts and WOAHA welcomed Dr Naree Ketusing and Dr Seungho Ryu as new members of the Group.

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

Dr John Grewar chaired the Group. Dr Ewa Camara acted as rapporteur, with support from the WOAHA Secretariat. The Group endorsed the proposed agenda.

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

The Group was informed that declared interests were reviewed by WOAHA, and it was agreed that none represented a potential conflict in the evaluation of the AHS status of Members.

## **3. Evaluation of applications from Members for official recognition of AHS-free status**

### **a) Egypt**

In August 2023, Egypt submitted a dossier to apply for the official recognition of its AHS-free status based on historical grounds.

The Group requested additional information and received clarifications during the evaluation of the dossier.

#### *i. Animal disease reporting*

The Group acknowledged that Egypt has a record of regular and prompt animal disease reporting.

#### *ii. Veterinary Services*

The Group acknowledged that the relevant legislations in relation to AHS were in place and that the General Organization for Veterinary Services (GOVS) was the authority within the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation (MALR) of Egypt, with sole responsibility for the governance and technical aspects of veterinary services in the country. The Group also acknowledged that the Veterinary Authority was ably represented at all administrative divisions throughout the country. The Group took note of the Performance of Veterinary Services (PVS) self-evaluation performed by Egypt in 2020-2021 using the WOAHA-PVS guidelines to create a framework for establishing priorities, strategic initiatives, and action plans to strengthen the Veterinary Service infrastructure.

The Group recognised the mutual coordination and cooperation between the GOVS and other stakeholders in the equine industry, such as the Egyptian Equestrian Racing Organization, Egyptian Equestrian Federation, Egyptian Agricultural Organization, veterinary services in military force and Police Equestrian as well as private stockholders, such as Horse Breeders Association. The Group also noted

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the training and awareness campaigns given to all stakeholders regarding surveillance for selected equid diseases, including AHS.

The Group noted that there was an animal identification and registration system in place and that equids were identified individually by either a specific animal registration card, microchipping, animal passport or identification form for native breeds, depending on the purpose of the horse. The Group also observed that the Egyptian Agricultural Organization was responsible for identifying and registering Arabian horses while the Equestrian Federation was responsible for identifying and registering horses included in its activities, all under the supervision of the GOVS.

*iii. Situation of AHS in the past 24 months*

The Group noted that the last case of AHS in Egypt was recorded in 1959 and that the disease was not reported in the country since 1960. Egypt was, therefore, eligible to claim historical freedom from AHS as described in Article 1.4.6. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

*iv. Absence of systematic vaccination in the past 12 months*

The Group noted that systematic vaccination and vaccine production was prohibited in the whole country since 1994 and that the production of the local inactivated AHS vaccine continued till 1998 to reserve a strategic stock for any emergency, which was prohibited thereafter.

The Group acknowledged the regulatory framework on the prohibition of AHS vaccination and production of the vaccine under Ministerial Decree 134/1994 and 2303/2011. The Group also took note of the CVO administrative Decree No. 770/2014, which emphasises the prohibition of the use of any unregistered vaccine and that the sale, importation and circulation of veterinary biologicals, including vaccines, is regulated by the Ministerial Decree 1616/2000.

*v. Importation of equids and their semen, oocytes, or embryos in accordance with Articles 12.1.6. to 12.1.9.*

Egypt confirmed that since 2021, equids were only imported from countries officially recognised as AHS-free by WOA. The Group also took note of the Ministerial Decree No. 2303/2011, which regulated the exportation and importation of equids and acknowledged Egypt's statement that if horses would be imported in the future from countries with undetermined AHS status, it would follow the provisions of Article 12.1.7 of the *Terrestrial Code*.

Egypt reported the importation of only live equids and stated that it had never imported semen, oocytes, or embryos of equids. Egypt informed that there is no legal importation of equids from Sudan, Libya, or any other African country and that there is negligible chance for illegal movement. The Group conceded with Egypt's explanation for the low risk of introducing AHS virus through smuggled animals based on the military supervision in those relevant areas.

*vi. Surveillance if adjacent to an AHS-infected country or zone if relevant*

The Group commended Egypt for the risk analysis studies conducted to assess the risk of introduction of AHS and took note of the conclusion made that the risk of introducing AHS virus via illegal importation or wildlife movement of infected live equids from a neighbouring country with undetermined AHS status or via incursion of infected vector by wind dispersal or accidental transportation was very low, citing the large distance to the nearest equids population in Egypt, the climate, geographical barriers, and the wind direction. The Group recommended that these risk analysis studies for AHS should be conducted routinely, also taking into account the risk of political instability and movement of refugees with animals that may be accompanied by the competent vector.

Whilst noting the presence of a protection zone at the southern border, the Group was concerned about the lack of information about the surveillance programme at the eastern and western borders of the country. Upon request, Egypt confirmed that sero-surveillance was implemented at the western border taking into consideration the scattered populations of equids in the desert area found at extended distance (approximately 300 km) away from the border. Egypt also confirmed that there are no susceptible animals in the Sinai Peninsula and vector- and sero-surveillance have been implemented along the Suez Canal.

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The Group recommended Egypt to strengthen its surveillance system at the borders and continue conducting periodical studies to assess the risk of introduction from neighbouring countries with undetermined AHS status. The Group requested an update in this regard when submitting the annual reconfirmation of the AHS-free status in November 2024.

vii. Surveillance in accordance with Articles 12.1.11. to 12.1.13.

The Group acknowledged the three established systems to monitor AHS in Egypt, which included clinical passive surveillance in the whole country, serological surveillance in places with high density of equids, and *Culicoides* spp. vector surveillance in Aswan, Ismailia and Matrouh. The Group noted the results of the vector surveillance carried out during the summer and autumn of 2022, which indicated that *Culicoides imicola* was not recorded and that the main recorded insect was *Culex* spp. The Group asked Egypt to clarify the absence of the *Culicoides*, considering that bluetongue, which is transmitted by the same vector as AHS, was reported in 2018. Egypt provided further details on the capture and identification methodology used for vector surveillance and confirmed that the outbreak of bluetongue was a sporadic event and that after a large surveillance campaign, bluetongue was not detected and that due to the geographical and climate nature of Egypt, not favourable for the survival of *Culicoides* spp., the disease was not established, and it was eradicated in 2018. The Group recommended that Egypt reviews the vector surveillance methodology (capture) to increase its sensitivity and should not consider *Culicoides imicola* as the only AHS vector but also other species of *Culicoides*.

In addition, the Group recognised the sero-surveillance that was conducted in the whole country from 2013 to 2015, in high-density areas from 2017 to 2020, and in the surveillance zone at the southern border from 2021 to 2023, and that all the results were negative. The Group also noted the presence of a provision in the Ministerial Decree 2303/2011 that required a serological survey for the diseases of the equids to be made periodically in all the governorates of Egypt.

viii. *Regulatory measures for the prevention, early detection, and control of AHS*

The Group acknowledged that AHS had been a notifiable disease in Egypt for at least the last ten years under Agricultural Law No. 53/1966 and that an early warning system was in place. The Group also took note of Ministerial Decrees 32/1967, 696/1984, as well as 2303/2011 in place on mandatory notification of clinical signs for AHS for early warning, as well as describing the restriction of movements, isolation, culling of infected animals and compensation.

It was noted that GOVS is responsible for raising awareness for animal keepers, farmers and breeders through extension meetings and seminars at the district and village levels. The Community-based Animal Health and Outreach (CAHO) Services work with animal owners and keepers to raise their awareness of disease control. In farms with High Health, High Status (HHP) horses, training is performed by the Egyptian Equestrian Federation, Egyptian Agricultural Organization and Egyptian Equestrian Racing Organization in collaboration with GOVS.

ix. *Compliance with the questionnaire in Article 1.7.1*

The Group agreed that the format of the dossier was compliant with the questionnaire in Article 1.7.1. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

*Conclusion*

Considering the information submitted in the dossier and the answers received from Egypt to the questions raised, the Group concluded that the application was compliant with the requirements of Chapter 12.1., as well as with Article 1.4.6. and the questionnaire in Article 1.7.1. of the *Terrestrial Code*. Therefore, the Group recommended the official recognition of Egypt as a country free from AHS.

**b) Saudi Arabia**

In July 2023, Saudi Arabia submitted a dossier to apply for the official recognition of its AHS-free status based on historical grounds.

The Group requested additional information and received clarifications during the evaluation of the dossier.

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i. *Animal disease reporting*

The Group acknowledged that Saudi Arabia has a record of regular and prompt animal disease reporting and that AHS has been a notifiable disease for at least the past ten years, according to the Resolution of the Minister of Agriculture No. (21433) of 17 May 2004 (3/28/1425).

ii. *Veterinary Services*

The Group acknowledged that the relevant legislations in relation to AHS were in place and that the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Plant Pests and Animal Diseases (WEQAA Center) was the competent authority responsible for animal health matters, import and export of animals as well as animal products in the country. The Group took note that Saudi Arabia already requested WOAHA to conduct a Performance of Veterinary Services (PVS) evaluation in 2023 and acknowledged the PVS self-evaluation performed in 2022 provided by the country.

The Group recognised the contribution and coordination between stakeholders involved in the official animal health activities in Saudi Arabia, such as the King Abdulaziz Arabian Horses Center at Dirab, the Saudi Equestrian Federation, the Jockey Club of Saudi Arabia, private veterinarians and animal owners. The Group also noted the training and awareness campaigns given to all stakeholders regarding farm biosecurity procedures, symptoms of AHS, and the importance of early notification for suspected cases.

The Group noted an animal identification and registration system in place requiring domestic animals to be registered within three months of birth according to the Royal Decree No. M/64 of 23 March 2021 (on identification and registration of livestock), and Royal Decree No. 429 of 05 February 1997 (27/9/1417H), which sets out the rules concerning the registration of horses in Saudi Arabia. The Group also understood that it was mandatory for horses to be identified individually using microchips and that four different institutions were responsible for the registration of horses according to the categories of the horses.

iii. *Situation of AHS in the past 24 months*

The Group acknowledged that the last case of AHS in Saudi Arabia was recorded in 1989. Therefore, Saudi Arabia was eligible to claim historical freedom from AHS as described in Article 1.4.6. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

iv. *Absence of systematic vaccination in the past 12 months*

The Group noted that systematic vaccination was prohibited in Saudi Arabia as per a Directive established on 19 December 1992, which was confirmed through periodic Ministerial Decree with the latest one dated 24 August 2022 (26/01/1444). The Group also acknowledged the various regulatory frameworks to prohibit AHS vaccine importation and use. In addition, the Group noted the actions taken on illegal vaccination detected in the country in 2018.

v. *Importation of equids and their semen, oocytes or embryos in accordance with Articles 12.1.6. to 12.1.9.*

The Group agreed that the importation of equids and their semen, oocytes or embryos in Saudi Arabia was done in accordance with Articles 12.1.6. to 12.1.9. of the *Terrestrial Code*. The Group noted that Saudi Arabia imported equids from countries with undetermined AHS status but agreed that the measures imposed on such imports were satisfactory. The Group recommended that if Saudi Arabia continues to import equids from countries with undetermined AHS status, they should strictly follow the provisions of the *Terrestrial Code*.

vi. *Surveillance if adjacent to an AHS-infected country or zone if relevant*

The Group noted the surveillance activities along the southern border implemented in 2015. The Group was, however, concerned with the lack of information on surveillance along the northern border with countries having undetermined AHS status. When asked, Saudi Arabia confirmed that there is no specific surveillance zone because these borders are considered low risk, citing the presence of a wide desert, the low numbers of equids, climate, low distribution of vectors, and efficient border control. According to the map provided by Saudi Arabia, the Group found the number of equids at the northern border high enough to warrant the implementation of a surveillance system as per Article 12.1.13. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

vii. *Surveillance in accordance with Articles 12.1.11. to 12.1.13.*

The Group acknowledged a surveillance plan in place but was concerned with the lack of adequate documentation of the passive clinical surveillance in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Group emphasised the fact that the design of the active surveillance system was aimed at determining disease prevalence rather than demonstrating freedom from disease and did not take into account the sensitivity of the tests used. However, the Group considered that this was mitigated by the sheer number of tests from 2022, where tests before shipping were performed.

The Group expressed concern about the system in place for recording, managing and analysing diagnostic, epidemiological and surveillance data since the evidence submitted by Saudi Arabia did not provide the clarity and confidence that the surveillance undertaken for AHS was well-defined and formally managed in a systematic manner.

The Group emphasised that demonstration of freedom from disease relies on a well-designed surveillance programme providing confidence that a disease does not reasonably occur at a level at, or above, the design prevalence. The Group requested that reporting of the surveillance programme, implementation, and results, including an evaluation of the undertaken surveillance and potential constraints of the programme, must be arranged in a manner that provides a transparent and clear report on the programme. This would bring clarity to the surveillance programme and allow for evidence-based decisions to be made.

viii. *Regulatory measures for the prevention, early detection, and control of AHS*

The Group acknowledged that AHS was a notifiable disease in Saudi Arabia and that an electronic notification system was in place for reporting and response to the disease. The Group also took note of the legal framework supporting the surveillance programme for early warning system including the fines under the Agricultural Law for lack of reporting.

ix. *Compliance with the questionnaire in Article 1.7.1*

The Group agreed that the format of the dossier was compliant with the questionnaire in Article 1.7.1. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

*Conclusion*

Considering the information submitted in the dossier and the answers received from Saudi Arabia to the questions raised, the Group agreed that the dossier was well written, including detailed procedures for surveillance and a sound AHS contingency plan. However, the Group considered the documented evidence weak in substantiating the effective implementation of these procedures in the field and expressed doubt about Saudi Arabia's ability to keep the surveillance level as described. The Group felt that it was not in a position to make a final decision and recommended a field mission to assess and verify the effective operation of an early warning system, including (but not limited to) the following:

- Awareness of appropriate actions to be taken by all stakeholders (e.g., horse keepers, private veterinarians, researchers of universities, etc.) upon detection of suspected cases of AHS throughout the established chain of command;
- Managing and analysing diagnostic and epidemiological data with effective record keeping;
- Solid evidence of the implementation of the system ensuring prompt reaction of the competent authorities on AHS suspicions resulting in real-time ruling out or confirmation of the disease;
- Level of surveillance at the borders (particularly in the north) with countries having undetermined AHS status.

**Minutes from the Scientific Commission meeting, 12-16 February 2024:**

The Commission also considered the recommendation of the *ad hoc* Group regarding the application from Saudi Arabia and provisionally concluded that it fulfilled the requirements of the *Terrestrial Code*. However, the Commission recommended to the Director General to mandate a mission to the country to verify compliance with the provisions of the *Terrestrial Code*, before any final decision be taken. Pending the outcome of the mission, the tentative decision of the

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Commission would be confirmed, and the country would be proposed for official recognition at the 91st General Session in May 2024.

**c) Other applications**

The Group assessed a request from another Member for the official recognition of AHS-free 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.

**4. Adoption of the report**

The Group reviewed the draft report and agreed to circulate it electronically for comments before the final adoption. Upon circulation, the Group agreed that the report captured the discussions.

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.../Appendices

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## Appendix 1 Terms of reference

### VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE *AD HOC* GROUP ON THE EVALUATION OF AFRICAN HORSE SICKNESS (AHS) STATUS OF MEMBERS

28-29 September and 5 October 2023

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#### Terms of reference

##### **Purpose**

The purpose of the *ad hoc* Group on the evaluation of African Horse Sickness (AHS) of Members is to evaluate applications for official recognition of AHS free 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 an AHS free status 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 AHS free status by WOAHA should complete and submit the questionnaire laid out in Chapter 1.7 of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)* and comply with all requirements specified in the *Terrestrial Code*. The Scientific Commission for Animal Diseases (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* for AHS. 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 1.7 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 WOAHA rules on confidentiality of information, 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., 28 August 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.



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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 1.7 and 12.1 of the *Terrestrial Code*;
- 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 **18 September 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) to be recognised (or not) as free from AHS 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 AHS free status. The report should indicate any information gaps or specific areas that should be addressed in the future by the Members.

#### **Reporting / timeline**

WOAH will circulate the draft report no more than seven days after the teleconference (no later than 12 October 2023) and the Group will finalise its report within ten days (indicative deadline: 22 October 2023).

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**Appendix 2 Agenda**

**AD HOC GROUP ON THE EVALUATION  
OF AFRICAN HORSE SICKNESS (AHS) STATUS OF MEMBERS**

**28-29 September and 5 October 2023**

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**Agenda**

1. Opening
  2. Adoption of the agenda and appointment of chairperson and rapporteur
  3. Evaluation of applications from Members for official recognition of AHS-free status
    - a. Egypt
    - b. Saudi Arabia
    - c. Other application
  4. Other matters
  5. Adoption of report
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## Appendix 3 List of Participants

### AD HOC GROUP ON THE EVALUATION OF AFRICAN HORSE SICKNESS (AHS) STATUS OF MEMBERS

28-29 September and 5 October 2023

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#### List of participants

#### MEMBERS

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**Dr Naree Ketusing**

Division of International Livestock  
Cooperation  
Department of Livestock Development  
Bangkok  
THAILAND

**Dr Sameeh Abutarbush**

Jordan University of Science and  
Technology  
Irbid  
JORDAN

**Dr Seungho Ryu**

College of Veterinary Medicine,  
Seoul National University  
Seoul,  
KOREA

**Dr John Grewar**

South African Equine Health and  
Protocols  
(SAEHP) NPC  
Cape Town  
SOUTH AFRICA

**Dr Ewa Camara**

European Commission  
DG SANTE  
Brussels  
BELGIUM

**Dr Stephan Zientara**

ANSES –Animal health laboratory  
Maisons-Alfort  
FRANCE

#### REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSION

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**Dr Baptiste Dungu**

Afrivet Business Management  
SOUTH AFRICA

#### WOAH HEADQUARTERS

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Dr Montserrat Arroyo  
Deputy Director General of International  
Standards and Science  
[woah@woah.org](mailto:woah@woah.org)

Dr Min-Kyung Park  
Head of Status Department  
[disease.status@woah.org](mailto:disease.status@woah.org)

Dr Manoel Augusto Tamassia  
Deputy Head of Status  
Department  
[disease.status@woah.org](mailto:disease.status@woah.org)

Dr Mauro Meske  
Disease Status Officer  
Status Department  
[disease.status@woah.org](mailto:disease.status@woah.org)

Dr Gloria Tamale Nassali  
Disease Status Officer  
Status Department  
[disease.status@woah.org](mailto:disease.status@woah.org)