

Benefits of Animal Identification and Traceability

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The benefits.....

The benefits of Animal Identification and Traceability (AIT) are clear. One need look no further than the Terrestrial Code of the OIE. Chapter 4.1 summarises these benefits neatly:

- the management of disease outbreaks and food safety incidents;
- vaccination programmes;
- herd/flock husbandry;
- zoning/compartmentalisation;
- surveillance;
- early response and notification systems;
- animal movement controls;
- inspection, certification, fair practices in trade and the utilisation of veterinary drugs;
- feed and pesticides at farm level.

The Codex, in its Principles for Traceability/Product Tracing (CAC/GL 60-2006) sets out a range of other advantages. It would be easy to get lost in a long discussion on the detail of these individual and collective advantages.

But that would risk to obscure some very simple yet important concepts. First, reliable identification and traceability systems are essential to effective animal disease control systems and thus to modern animal production systems. Second, food safety systems and the stability of consumer markets are equally dependent on such systems. Third, trade in live animals and animal products is very seriously compromised in their absence.

It is very opportune therefore to have this conference which involves the key international standard setting bodies responsible for animal health and food safety, the OIE and the Codex respectively. Their standards, especially in the area of identification and traceability, in turn will have a major impact on the conditions under which animals and animal products can be safely traded.

In the EC, our approach towards animal identification and traceability has its origins in a number of key, complementary, objectives:

- the protection of animal and public health;
- the creation of a Single European Market for live animals and animal products;
- consumer information, crisis management and the prevention of fraud.

The role of Identification and Traceability in relation to improved animal health

The contribution of animal identification and traceability to better animal health is self-evident. Successful surveillance, control and eradication of animal diseases is much easier if you have effective identification and traceability systems in place.

In Europe we have a very high and uniform level of animal health. This was not always the case. Up until the early 1990s, the animal health situation was far from satisfactory.

One of the major obstacles to progress was the absence of effective and coordinated Europe-wide effort to curb animal diseases. In the absence of such coordinated efforts, it was very difficult for individual countries to make progress.

Even with strict controls on movements of live animals and animal products, it is almost impossible to control and eradicate diseases if your neighbours are not making a similar effort.

Our Member States agreed on Europe-wide efforts to tackle animal diseases. Ambitious targets were established. Significant financial resources were also invested. And, importantly, access to intra-Community trade was also conditional on respect of high animal health conditions.

There was therefore a combination of political commitment, financial assistance and trade incentives which together provided the impetus for major progress.

A healthy and constructive competition was also created among Member States which encouraged them individually and collectively to make the necessary efforts.

Today, that progress is evident. The key animal diseases, such as rabies, foot and mouth disease and classical swine fever, are either eradicated or under control. We have also proven that progress can be achieved quickly.

As an example, the most recent enlargement of the EC to include ten new Member States was achieved without any compromise on the very high levels of animal health and food safety in the Community. They quickly adapted to the existing regulatory requirements and proved that with the necessary support and effort, rapid progress can be made.

When it came to the implementing measures, identification and traceability was probably the single biggest contributory factor in this success story. You will find comprehensive provisions on identification and traceability in all of the key animal health legislation in the Community. It ensures that the localisation and tracing of animals for veterinary purposes is possible.

Probably the best example relates to identification and traceability of live bovines. Community legislation requires that all live bovines are double ear-tagged, have individual passports, are entered in the herd register of the farmer and are in turn registered on a centralised database maintained by the Competent Authority.

All movements of these animals are noted as they move through the production chain. This allows very accurate tracing. The system works to a very high level of efficiency. Regular controls are carried out both by the Member States veterinary services and by the European Commission's services.

Enforcement is helped by the important penalties which apply to infringements. These can and sometimes does include destruction of animals which are found not to be registered.

We will shortly be introducing ambitious new traceability requirements in relation to sheep. A significant difference is that the passage of time has allowed us to make much better use of electronic identification for the measures which will apply to sheep from the beginning of next year.

The benefits in terms of food safety

Remaining with beef provides me with the opportunity to outline another area where the benefits are evident, food safety. The traceability system I have briefly outlined does not stop at the slaughterhouse.

It continues throughout the retail chain. Labelling of beef cuts in Europe includes reference numbers which identify the slaughterhouse or origin, the animals concerned and the place of birth, rearing and slaughter of the animal!

In essence, therefore, when we speak of a farm to table approach in Europe we really mean it. This bridges the gap between animal health and food safety, ensuring that we have a system in place which is multi-functional.

This comprehensive system clearly requires a huge investment by all parties, especially farmers themselves. It is important that the investment is worthwhile and that it represents value for money. In turn, this requires a continuous re-appraisal of the costs and benefits.

Critics of our approach will point to the motivating forces and in particular the impact of BSE. It is of course true that BSE did drive the process. In a matter of several months the EC went from a relatively rudimentary system to the highly sophisticated system we have today.

That change was fundamental to the restoration of consumer confidence in the safety of beef. Consumption had fallen by almost half at the height of the BSE crisis. Only when consumers were reassured that the measures were in place guaranteeing the source of beef did demand for beef recover. Today, BSE is no longer a consumer concern.

Nonetheless, there is no significant demand to turn the clock back and reduce the levels of traceability and identification currently in place. Certainly, there are demands to keep the costs to a minimum but there are no pressures for a fundamental review.

Instead the emphasis is on finding more efficient ways of identifying and tracing animals. This includes in particular making better use of modern electronic identification and tracking systems.

Our producers, consumers and retailers have learned not only to live with the current systems but now consider them as non negotiable features of our animal and food production systems. The benefits are seen to extend beyond animal health to include also the protection of human health.

Consumers are reassured that products can be rapidly traced throughout the food chain in the event of problems. Food manufacturers and retailers similarly see identification and traceability as key components of their safety and quality assurance systems.

It is important in this respect to keep in mind that identification and traceability now extend throughout the food chain in the European Union. Our legislation includes a range of requirements for foodstuffs in general. As livestock products are such an important component of overall food production, this requires in turn that there is a clear trace of their origin and movements.

This has proven its use repeatedly in keeping to a minimum the problems which arise when there are food safety problems. In such cases, products can now be traced much quicker and withdrawn from the market. However, traceability is also growing in importance for reasons which have nothing to do with food safety or animal health.

They are in place for reasons of stock control, the monitoring of marketing trends, identification of consumer preferences etc. Producers can benefit from these developments. Take the example of sales of poultry in Europe. You can buy a chicken for as little as two or three Euro. This is the standard broiler.

However, you can also pay several times more for a very high quality chicken such as a Poulet de Bresse, a renowned French speciality chicken. And in between you can choose from a range of other consumer driven preferences such as organic, free-range, one hundred percent grain-fed, welfare friendly etc birds.

However, it is only possible with rigorous and reliable identification and traceability systems. Retailers increasingly insist on such systems and there is an increasing trend on their part towards supply systems where origin is both known and assured.

This trend is growing to include also consumer preferences in relation to sustainability, environmental and social demands. In many cases these demands are virtually outside the control of the public authorities. This is a cause of growing tensions as such demands can represent barriers to trade, especially for developing countries.

It is no coincidence that the issue of these private standards is rising in prominence in both the OIE and the Codex. The main concern is that they are often unscientific and are put in place in a non transparent manner without any input from the public authorities.

The trade dimension within Europe....

It is interesting to look at the European experience in a trade context. Clearly, the circumstances differ and the animal health systems have to reflect these differences. Some of these differences make animal disease controls easier, while others work in the opposite direction. The highly intensive nature of much of animal production in Europe clearly carries important risks.

Outbreaks of major animal diseases can have devastating consequences where there are large concentrations of animals. It is essential that there are excellent identification and traceability systems in place to keep these risks to a minimum. Such systems are essentially an investment or insurance policy to avert or reduce the risks of disease outbreaks.

Like all insurance policies, they appear like a luxury or an unnecessary expense when times are good. However, when there are outbreaks they prove their worth.

Similarly, the high level of movements of live animals both within and between Member States also carries risks. These movements reflect significant economic, climatic and even geographic factors. There are especially significant movements of animals from Northern to Southern Europe. Again, these can only take place on a safe basis if there are effective traceability systems in place.

The international trade dimension.....

An interesting feature of the European approach is that we continue to import quite significant quantities of animal products from third countries, even though identification and traceability systems in these third countries differ significantly from ours. We have accepted that we can nonetheless continue to import safely. This has raised questions in Europe.

Our response is that we look to the overall level of controls, of which identification and traceability is a key but not the only control. For example, deboning and maturation of beef can offer additional safeguards in relation to foot and mouth disease which need to be taken into account in making the overall assessment on the safety of imports.

Nonetheless, it is the case that weaknesses in identification and traceability systems, with the resulting difficulty of movement controls, is probably the biggest single irritant in relation to imports of fresh meat products. How can our trade partners address this problem?

We do not expect them to replicate the EU approach which is not necessarily appropriate to their conditions. However, we do believe that more could be done to better identify and trace those animals which are destined for our markets. Electronic identification offers real prospects in this direction.

In addition, farmers have to be offered greater incentives to meet the particular requirements of European markets. It is our experience that exporters are too often interested only in sourcing their animals at the lowest possible costs. They are not prepared to pay a premium for animals which meet European requirements.

This is a big risk to take. For a relatively small investment access to lucrative European markets could be secured or maintained on a more stable basis.

The competent authorities need to play a central role. The EC still counts on the Competent Authority to ensure compliance with our import requirements. It must take the lead in putting in place these requirements including identification and traceability. In many respects this is a public good. Clearly the private sectors cooperation is essential but ultimately a truly successful approach needs a public lead.

New challenges and opportunities

It is an irony that identification and traceability are seen by many as obstacles and a problem. The reality is that they should be seen as a major opportunity to equip our animal health and production systems to play their full role in meeting our society's many needs. The international standard setting bodies should play their part in making this ambition a reality.

Certainly, challenges remain and the EU remains vigilant to new risks. The spread of bluetongue to Northern Europe is a painful reminder of the need to avoid complacency.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the disruption which has arisen due to bluetongue would be far, far greater in the absence of the sophisticated movement controls which are currently in place. These movement controls would be unworkable without the supporting identification and traceability systems.

Other diseases like West Nile Fever and Highly Pathogenic Avian Flu also present new and important challenges. We are alert to these risks. Already there are a range of initiatives underway to update and strengthen our animal health systems.

This includes the Community Animal Health Strategy. Identification and traceability systems will however remain central components of our animal health strategy. We will be looking instead at how we can use new technologies to make them work more effectively.

It is very important that the OIE and Codex are ambitious in relation to identification and traceability. It is a big mistake to assume that the absence of international standards reduces the potential for national standards to create trade barriers.

On the contrary, in the absence of international standards individual countries have carte blanche to adopt their own measures with few restraints. This is ultimately bad for trade.

More importantly it is also bad for animal and public health protection. In an increasingly integrated world economy, faced with significant new challenges like continued world population growth and climate change we need global standards which provide a high level of protection. This must include identification and traceability.

The EC and its Member States therefore would like to see ambitious conclusions emerging from this conference which we would hope would put these issues very high on the agenda of our shared efforts to promote improved animal and public health protection at the global level.

The recently agreed OIE Chapters on Animal Identification and on the design and implementation of identification systems to achieve animal identification already provide a solid foundation on which to build. The Codex also has a key role to play, notably in the CCFICS. This Committee recently put further work on guidance on traceability on hold until there has been discussions in the Regional Coordinating Committees on the need for such guidance.

We hope that the Regional Coordinating Committees will take a constructive approach towards this invitation. Traceability is a modern day reality. It is already hugely important for access to markets. This trend will increase.

It will be driven primarily by markets and the demands of consumers and retailers. This will apply both to domestic markets and international trade. Regulators, at both the national and multilateral level, must engage constructively in ensuring that these trends deliver real benefits for society.

So to conclude, a number of very brief points on the European experience with Identification and traceability-

- They deliver very real benefits in terms of animal health and food safety.
- They greatly assist trade.
- They are growing in importance and this trend is being in large part driven by the private sector and consumer and retailer demands.
- It is a mistake to view them only as a problem, instead we should look to the real opportunities they provide to improve our animal production systems and to bring further benefits to society.
- Regulators, at both the national and multilateral level, must be positive on their potential.
- The OIE and Codex have a responsibility to lead this process at the multilateral level.

Thank you for your attention.