Opening Address to the OIE International Conference on Animal Identification and Traceability "From Farm to Fork", Buenos Aires, Argentina, March 2009.

Dr Barry O'Neil President of the OIE International Committee.

Distinguished guests, OIE delegates, ladies and gentlemen, as President of the OIE International Committee it's my pleasure to welcome you to this International Conference on Animal Identification and Traceability.

I would like to begin by thanking you all for the commitment you have made by being here with us in Buenos Aires for this conference, even though we are living in very difficult financial times. Our conference topic is an extremely important current issue, and I am sure your investment will be rewarded with new understandings and knowledge along with key networks that I encourage you to make this week.

I would also like to thank the Government of Argentina and SENESA, the European Commissions DG SANCO, and the United States USDA along with other sponsors, and the organising committee, for arranging the excellent programme that we have ahead of us, that I'm sure will result in a successful conference.

It has become increasingly important for livestock producing countries to have an effective animal ID and tracing system. The primary reasons driving animal identification and tracing are related to trade and market access, management of livestock diseases, and providing assurance to global consumers of safe, high quality food products.

Animal ID and traceability is a core part of our animal health and food safety systems that should link from animal production to animal processing and distribution – from farm to fork.

But let me emphasise that it is a tool that assists a country to achieve its animal health and food safety objectives, and does not remove the need for a competent veterinary service and the various components of effective animal health and food safety systems.

The objectives of animal ID and traceability systems will differ in each country, depending on the needs and the risk factors involved, and also depending on the animal production situation, and therefore the systems themselves will be different.

If we are wanting to make comparisons between our various approaches we must do this on an outcomes basis looking at what they achieve, rather than the component elements of them which will by their very nature be different as they are aimed at different needs and risks and will be applied in countries at different stages of development, and therefore they will involve different approaches and technologies.

The OIE has actively encouraged improvement and where possible standardisation of animal identification and tracing systems worldwide. From the first conference on permanent animal ID here in Buenos Aires in 1998, to the current recommendations and guidelines that we adopted by the OIE International Committee in May 2007, the OIE has been advocating an outcome based approach, and working with our colleagues in Codex Alimentarius to achieve alignment with our respective standards.

However the OIE recognises that with animal ID and traceability, there are still many concerns and issues that our members are needing clarification and support, and we hope that this conference and the resolutions coming out of it will go a long way to addressing these, and in determining where the OIE needs to put additional efforts.

I would like to spend the remainder of my opening address on why we have had significant delays or "false starts" to the implementation of an effective robust system in many countries, and what we can do to minimise this happening?

I believe there is still a lack of understanding and therefore acceptance as to the need and benefits for integrated whole of life animal ID and traceability systems, resulting in disagreement of the various stakeholders with what is required for the future.

And while I think some groups are genuinely failing to understand what the rationale for improved approaches are, this is also in part being exacerbated by nervousness that very technologically advanced and costly systems may be imposed by trading partners on a particular country, rather than a programme that addresses the animal and food safety risks associated with the country concerned.

There have also been concerns raised about data protection and security and who will have the rights to get access to the information being generated, and of course concerns about who should pay the costs of a more integrated whole of life system, which could include not insignificant financial commitments over time.

So what has changed over the last 10 or so years that now requires more complex and costly traceability systems, when many countries already have in place existing systems of one form or another that have meet historic needs?

I think there have been a number of changes that need to be recognised. Firstly the critical importance of food safety for our consumers, especially in light of numerous food safety scares and events such as those involving chemical residues, salmonella, *E coli*, and BSE.

Our consumers are rightfully demanding of producers and processors to supply safe food, and part of achieving this is to be able to undertake rapid tracing to identify specific consignments back to the processing premises, farms of origin and individual animals that have supplied animal products to the consignment, so that appropriate action can be taken in reality on what would be a smaller number of producers and/or processors than would otherwise be the case.

We all have requirements and obligations to be giving our trading partners absolutely credible assurances as to the animal health and food safety situations in our countries or of specific consignments of products, and the demand for this activity has significantly increased over the last 10 years.

Another change is that disease control measures and the science behind them have significantly advanced, as has the speed and movement of people and goods in our globalised trading system.

This requires us to be responding far quicker to identify, contain and eradicate new or emerging animal disease and food safety risks, and with more advanced science we can now target our control efforts to those animal populations that present the risk, thereby eradicating diseases faster and with less overall cost and impact on producers. This approach depends on our ability to know which populations present the risk and our ability to rapidly trace and locate them immediately.

Farming systems have changed, with many now being multimillion dollar enterprises, and like other parts of the animal production and processing system, these enterprises are wanting to mitigate potential risks to their significant investments, and ensure that their production and processing systems can continue to operate in the event of a new animal disease or food safety event.

Animal ID and traceability is in this case a future insurance policy to protect against economic shocks, by enabling countries to continue to give assurances to consumers and their markets, that products are not affected by a particular event, rather than having the whole country being treated as affected.

My belief is that there has been significant change over the last 10 or so years that are requiring every country to consider whether their existing animal ID and traceability system(s) are still fit for purpose in light of the current and future challenges and needs.

Let me now move to how a country can move forward in working through the various issues and concerns that may have been raised, so as to minimise the delays and false starts that we are seeing, and to be able to put in place animal ID and traceability systems that are necessary to address the risks.

The most important factor to me is to make sure we start with a partnership of the various key stakeholders of the production and processing system which includes government agencies, farmers, animal processors, transporters and sale yard operators.

Unless we start with such a partnership, which will also ultimately need to determine what future governance arrangements are needed, we will fail to get engagement and agreement of the necessary parties, and as a result end up with a system that doesn’t meet the needs, or that isn’t able to achieve high levels of compliance.

This partnership needs to drive the review of specific risk factors and situation within the country and as a result agree on the future systems outcomes and scope, the design of the system including performance criteria, any required legal framework and obligations, and the training and support that will be needed for it to be fully effective.

And last but not least the partnership also needs to agree on who will pay for the various associated costs, and being a partnership all partners will need to contribute their fair and appropriate share, in cash and or in kind.

Part of the process of determining what is needed for the future, must include looking at what currently exists, and whether by better linking up the existing elements of animal ID and traceability, a country can achieve its future objectives.

This is not just a useful exercise to determine whether the future needs can be achieved by better utilisation and integration of the existing systems, but it will also identify what are the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches.

When a country looks at historic animal ID and traceability systems some of the key areas that are often not achieving to the required levels include property data not being sufficiently complete, data on livestock not being fully aligned to properties, different rules existing between current operating systems that are working in isolation of each other, and the inability to share data which in part relates to an over reliance on paper based systems.

Depending on what needs and risk factors are involved, a step by step development of a future system is normally going to enable greater progress rather than trying to get agreement to implement in a short time frame very advanced and expensive systems.

This approach requires the flexibility to allow future enhancements to be made over time, which with careful design should be possible to achieve this in a phased approach.

In New Zealand my own country, we have had a full partnership approach to review our current approaches and to determine our future needs and I can fully support the importance and benefits of working in this way

I believe that that the success of all our efforts in this area will ultimately depend on a number of non technical issues which include having effective governance and clear accountability, along with the flexibility to allow existing partners to exit and new partners to enter, which is likely to happen as the scope of the programme changes over time based on changing needs and risks.

Lastly like many ventures in life if a new system is going to succeed it must be easily understood, easy to operate within and easy to do business with so not requiring excessive compliance costs to manage and operate. If we can't keep it simple with sufficient incentives to participants to comply with, the chances of a future system being successful are in my opinion very low.

Finally with an issue like animal ID and traceability, it is easy for us to reach a stalemate between the various partners, and as a result embark on endless reviews that often don't advance our knowledge, to try and break the impasse.

So a challenge to all of us is not to loose sight of what we are wanting to achieve by getting trapped within detail and end up not meeting the current and future needs of our government, our industry, or our consumers.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for your attention and I wish you a successful conference, and I hope what you learn here this week will help you to advance your respective situations in your own countries and sectors in this important topic.