

USER'S GUIDE

A. Introduction

- 1) The WOAHA *Aquatic Animal Health Code* (hereafter referred to as the *Aquatic Code*) establishes standards for the improvement of aquatic animal health worldwide. The *Aquatic Code* also includes standards for the welfare of farmed fish and use of antimicrobial agents in aquatic animals. The purpose of this guide is to advise the Competent Authorities in WOAHA Member Countries on how to use the *Aquatic Code*.
- 2) Competent Authorities should use the standards in the *Aquatic Code* to develop measures for prevention including biosecurity at aquaculture establishments, early detection, reporting, control or eradication of pathogenic agents in aquatic animals (amphibians, crustaceans, fish and molluscs) and preventing their spread via international trade in aquatic animals and aquatic animal products, while avoiding unjustified sanitary barriers to trade.
- 3) The standards in the *Aquatic Code* are based on the most recent scientific and technical information and are adopted by the World Assembly of Delegates. Correctly applied, they protect aquatic animal health during the production and trade in aquatic animals and aquatic animal products as well as the welfare of farmed fish.
- 4) The absence of chapters, articles or recommendations on particular pathogenic agents or aquatic animal products does not preclude the application of appropriate sanitary measures by the Competent Authorities, provided they are based on risk analyses conducted in accordance with the *Aquatic Code*.
- 5) The year that a chapter was first adopted and the year of last revision are noted at the end of each chapter.
- 6) The *Aquatic Code* is available on the WOAHA website at: <http://www.woaha.org>.

B. Aquatic Code content

- 1) Key terms and expressions used in more than one chapter in the *Aquatic Code* are defined in the Glossary, where common dictionary definitions are not deemed to be adequate. The reader should be aware of definitions given in the Glossary when reading and using the *Aquatic Code*. Defined terms appear in italics. In the online version of the *Aquatic Code*, a hyperlink leads to the relevant definition.
- 2) The term '(under study)' is found in some rare instances, with reference to an article or part of an article. This means that this part of the text has not been adopted by the World Assembly of Delegates and the particular provisions are thus not part of the *Aquatic Code*.
- 3) The standards in the chapters of Section 1 are designed for the implementation of measures for the surveillance and notification of pathogenic agents. The section includes the criteria for listing aquatic animal diseases, the diseases which are listed by WOAHA, procedures for notification to WOAHA, and criteria for listing species as susceptible to infection with a specific pathogenic agent.
- 4) The standards in the chapters of Section 2 are designed to guide the importing country in conducting import risk analysis in the absence of WOAHA standards. The importing country should also use these standards to justify import measures which are more stringent than existing WOAHA standards.
- 5) The standards in the chapters of Section 3 are designed for the establishment, maintenance and evaluation of Aquatic Animal Health Services, including communication. These standards are intended to assist the Competent Authorities of Member Countries to meet their objectives of improving aquatic animal health and the welfare of farmed fish, as well as to establish and maintain confidence in their international aquatic animal health certificates.
- 6) The standards in the chapters of Section 4 are designed for the implementation of measures for the prevention and control of pathogenic agents. Measures in this section include biosecurity for aquaculture establishments, zoning, compartmentalisation, disinfection, contingency planning, following, handling, disposal and treatment of aquatic animal waste and control of pathogenic agents in aquatic animal feed.
- 7) The standards in the chapters of Section 5 are designed for the implementation of general sanitary measures for trade. They address certification and the measures applicable by the exporting, transit and importing countries. A range of model international aquatic animal health certificates is provided to facilitate consistent documentation for international trade.
- 8) The standards in the chapters of Section 6 are designed to ensure the responsible and prudent use of antimicrobial agents in aquatic animals.
- 9) The standards in the chapters of Section 7 are designed for the implementation of welfare measures for farmed fish. The standards cover the general principles for welfare of farmed fish, including during transport, stunning and killing for human consumption, and when killing for disease control purposes.

- 10) The standards in each of the chapters of Sections 8 to 11 are designed to prevent the pathogenic agents of diseases listed by WOAHA from being introduced into an importing country. Each disease chapter includes a list of currently known susceptible species. The standards take into account the nature of the traded commodity, the aquatic animal health status of the exporting country, zone or compartment, and the risk reduction measures applicable to each commodity.

These standards assume that the agent is either not present in the importing country or is the subject of a control or eradication programme. Sections 8 to 11 each relate to amphibian, crustacean, fish and molluscan hosts, respectively.

C. Specific issues

- 1) Notification

Chapter 1.1. describes Member Countries' obligations under Organic Statutes of the Office International des Epizooties. Listed diseases, as prescribed in Chapter 1.1., are compulsorily notifiable. Member Countries are encouraged to also provide information to WOAHA on other aquatic animal health events of epidemiological significance, including occurrence of emerging diseases.

Chapter 1.2. describes the criteria for the inclusion of a disease listed by WOAHA.

Chapter 1.3. specifies the diseases that are listed by WOAHA. Diseases are divided into four sections corresponding to amphibian, crustacean, fish and molluscan hosts, respectively.

- 2) Diagnostic tests

Methods for diagnosis of listed diseases are provided in the WOAHA *Manual of Diagnostic Tests for Aquatic Animals* (hereafter referred to as the *Aquatic Manual*). Experts responsible for laboratory testing should be fully conversant with the methods in the *Aquatic Manual*.

- 3) Freedom from a disease

Article 1.4.6. provides general principles for declaring a country, zone or compartment free from infection with a pathogenic agent. This article applies when there is no disease-specific chapter.

- 4) Pathogen differentiation

Some pathogens have one or more variants. Existence of highly pathogenic variants and the need to differentiate them from more benign variants are recognised in the *Aquatic Code*. When pathogenic agents have strains that are stable, possess characteristics that can be used for diagnostic purposes, and display different levels of pathogenicity, different standards providing protection proportionate to the risk posed by the different strains should be applied. Infection with infectious salmon anaemia virus is the first listed disease for which risk management options based on strain differentiation are provided.

- 5) Determining the susceptibility of species to listed diseases

Chapter 1.5. provides criteria for determining which species are listed as susceptible in Article X.X.2. of each disease-specific chapter in the *Aquatic Code*. This is important in the aquaculture context, given the large number of existing and new aquaculture species.

This is work in progress and the list of susceptible species in some chapters is yet to be assessed against the criteria in Chapter 1.5.

- 6) Trade requirements

Aquatic animal health measures related to international trade should be based on WOAHA standards. A Member Country may authorise the importation of aquatic animals or aquatic animal products into its territory under conditions different from those recommended by the *Aquatic Code*. To scientifically justify more stringent measures, the importing country should conduct a risk analysis in accordance with WOAHA standards, as described in Chapter 2.1. Members of the World Trade Organization should refer to the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures.

Chapters 5.1. to 5.3. describe the obligations and ethical responsibilities of importing and exporting countries in international trade. Competent Authorities and all veterinarians and certifying officials directly involved in international trade should be familiar with these chapters. Chapter 5.3. also describes the WOAHA informal procedure for dispute mediation.

Disease-specific chapters in the *Aquatic Code* include articles listing the aquatic animal products that are considered safe for trade without the imposition of disease-specific sanitary measures, regardless of the status of the exporting country or zone for the pathogenic agent in question. Where such a list is present, importing countries should not require any conditions related to the agent in question with respect to the listed aquatic animal products.

7) Safety of aquatic animal products for trade

Chapter 5.4. describes the criteria used to assess the safety of aquatic animal products. The aquatic animal products that have been assessed and found to meet these criteria are listed in each disease-specific chapter. Article 5.4.1. describes criteria to assess the safety of aquatic animal products for any purpose. Article 5.4.2. describes criteria to assess the safety of aquatic animal products for the purposes of retail trade for human consumption.

Article X.X.3. lists aquatic animal products that may be imported for any purpose regardless of the disease status of the exporting country, zone or compartment for the disease in question. The inclusion of an aquatic animal product in Article X.X.3. is based on evidence that demonstrates the absence of the pathogenic agent in that product or the inactivation of the pathogenic agent by physical, chemical or biological means.

Article X.X.14. and Article 10.4.16. list aquatic animal products that may be imported for retail trade for human consumption regardless of the disease status of the exporting country, zone or compartment for the disease in question. The assessment for inclusion of aquatic animal products in these articles is based on the form and presentation of the product, the expected volume of aquatic animal waste generated by the consumer and the likely presence of viable pathogenic agent in the aquatic animal waste.

8) International aquatic animal health certificates

An international aquatic animal health certificate is an official document that the Competent Authority of the exporting country issues in accordance with Chapter 5.1. and Chapter 5.2. It lists aquatic animal health requirements for the exported commodity. The quality of the exporting country's Aquatic Animal Health Services is essential in providing assurances to trading partners regarding the safety of exported aquatic animal products. This includes the Aquatic Animal Health Services' ethical approach to the provision of international health certificates and their history in meeting their notification obligations.

International health certificates underpin international trade and provide assurances to the importing country regarding the health status of the aquatic animals and aquatic animal products imported. The measures prescribed should take into account the health status of both exporting and importing countries and be based upon the standards in the *Aquatic Code*.

The following steps should be taken when drafting international aquatic animal health certificates:

- a) identify the diseases, from which the importing country is justified in seeking protection because of its own aquatic animal health status. Importing countries should not impose measures in regards to diseases that occur in their own territory but are not subject to official control programmes;
- b) for aquatic animal products capable of transmitting these diseases through international trade, the importing country should apply the relevant articles in the disease-specific chapters. The application of the articles should be adapted to the disease status of the country, zone or compartment of origin. Such a status should be established in accordance with Article 1.4.6. except when articles of the relevant disease chapter specify otherwise;
- c) when preparing international aquatic animal health certificates, the importing country should endeavour to use terms and expressions in accordance with the definitions given in the Glossary. International aquatic animal health certificates should be kept as simple as possible and should be clearly worded, to avoid misunderstanding of the importing country's requirements;
- d) Chapter 5.10. provides, as further guidance to Member Countries, model health certificates that should be used as a baseline.

9) Guidance notes for importers and exporters

It is recommended that Competent Authorities prepare 'guidance notes' to assist importers and exporters to understand trade requirements. These notes should identify and explain the trade conditions, including the measures to be applied before and after export and during transport and unloading, and the relevant legal obligations and operational procedures. The guidance notes should advise on all details to be included in the health certification accompanying the consignment to its destination. Exporters should also be reminded of the International Air Transport Association rules governing air transport of aquatic animals and aquatic animal products.

NB: FIRST ADOPTED IN 1995; MOST RECENT UPDATE ADOPTED IN 2022.

