

81st General Session of the OIE: Continuing mobilisation of efforts to protect animals

No fewer than 800 participants, representing the vast majority of the 178 Member countries of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and many intergovernmental, non-governmental, regional and national organisations attended the 81st General Session of the World Assembly of Delegates of the OIE, where they heard presentations on the Organisation's scientific and standard-setting work.

In 2012, OIE Delegates had already adopted new general normative principles on animal welfare relating to animal production systems and a new chapter on the welfare of cattle bred for meat production, thus paving the way for the adoption of new standards on other livestock production systems. The work in progress continued in 2013 with the adoption of a chapter on conditions in broiler production systems, which provides harmonised criteria and indicators to measure the welfare of broilers during production. This latest achievement, obtained through a consensus of Member Countries after several years of discussions, is proof of the effectiveness of the Organisation's international standard-setting process, based on scientific excellence, transparency of procedures and democratically adopted standards (one country, one vote).

A new normative chapter on rinderpest was also adopted. It enacts measures designed to secure the global eradication of the disease, formally announced by the OIE and its partners in 2011, and includes measures to be taken in the event of any accidental or deliberate release of the virus and rules to be followed by laboratories that still hold stocks of infectious particles. Global eradication of rinderpest is a truly historic victory and must be preserved at all costs. To this end, the OIE produced an awareness-raising video and took advantage of the General Session to launch a global digital communication programme on the destruction and sequestration of rinderpest virus still held in laboratories, calling on Member Countries to respect the commitments in this respect that they had agreed to in a vote at the OIE in 2011.

The national Delegates approved the new list of countries or zones that had applied for official recognition of their status with respect to one or more of four priority diseases: bovine spongiform encephalopathy, foot and mouth disease, contagious bovine pleuropneumonia and African horse sickness. They also decided to extend this recognition procedure to another two diseases: classical swine fever and peste des petits ruminants, a disease for which a global control programme will be implemented.

On the epizootic front, in April 2013 the People's Republic of China notified the OIE of infection of poultry with influenza virus A(H7N9), which had just previously been detected in humans. The OIE immediately emphasised the exceptional nature of this virus strain, which has very low pathogenicity for birds but can cause serious disease in infected humans. Building on previous experience, the OIE addressed this episode with the support of its expert network of excellence and its internationally recognised sanitary standards. The 81st General Session provided an opportunity for the Delegate of the People's Republic of China to present an update on the situation and for OIE experts to present the results of missions conducted in the country. These presentations, which provided new recommendations on preventive measures to minimise the risk of global spread of the virus, were of great interest for all Member Countries and for the international community as a whole.

This animal health event highlights more than ever the importance of the OIE's role. Crises such as those triggered by avian influenza, foot and mouth disease, bluetongue and other emerging and re-emerging diseases, are generating an ever-growing demand for information, from the general public and the media as well as from technical and political decision-makers. It is crucial for everyone to realise that well-structured, effective animal health systems make a major contribution to public health protection, while allowing a balanced, equitable global policy that ensures safe trade in animals and animal products. In this respect, the Organisation decided to issue a reminder of its central role at the interface between animal and human health and welfare by unveiling its new slogan: "Protecting animals, preserving our future".

Good governance of animal health systems depends on the quality of the world's Veterinary Services. The OIE PVS Pathway was set up with the aim of ensuring that the Veterinary Services of the 178 Member Countries comply with OIE quality standards. To support the accomplishment of this worldwide mission, a senior representative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, who attended the 81st General Session, announced a substantial financial contribution.

To help raise awareness among policy makers and civil society and explain to them the economic and social benefits of the OIE's actions, H.R.H. Princess Haya, who also plays a very active role in promoting the nobility of horses throughout the world, has become an OIE Goodwill Ambassador, and now assists our Organisation in worldwide communication actions. At the opening of the 81st General Session, Princess Haya spoke of the importance of taking innovative action and finding sustainable solutions for the health, environmental and economic challenges we are now facing. On a topic championed by the OIE, she emphasised the importance of promoting international cooperation and diversifying partnerships, in particular between the public and private sectors, to create lasting synergies to protect our world from present and future health threats.