



## The Odyssey of Rinderpest Eradication

1924 and 2011 represent two milestones, both related to the global fight against rinderpest, one of the most dreaded animal diseases in history.

In 1924, following a new incursion of the rinderpest virus in Europe, via the port of Antwerp in Belgium, a group of visionary veterinarians decided to found an international organisation that could inform its Member Countries of epizootics and provide them with the scientific information they needed to improve their animal disease control measures.

Nearly 90 years later, the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) has grown from the 28 signatory countries of the 25 January 1924 International Agreement to 178 Member Countries, and is now the World Organisation for Animal Health, whilst keeping its historic acronym. The initial recommendations to promote a coordinated international effort for the control of rinderpest and other epizootics listed at that time (foot and mouth disease, anthrax, sheep and goat pox, rabies, glanders, dourine, classical swine fever) laid the groundwork for what were to become OIE-recommended international health policies.

The OIE's first steps in rinderpest control, aimed in particular at Asia, Africa and the Middle East, consisted in the establishment of scientific cooperation with existing national research institutes in order to detect the most efficient methods for fighting the spread of rinderpest, including the production and standardisation of safe and effective vaccines, and to achieve a strategic consensus on the scientific bases of the organisation's actions aiming at controlling and preventing rinderpest in the Member Countries.

As early as the 1960s, mass vaccination campaigns in the Member Countries concerned, accompanied by conventional control measures, led to a substantial decline in the disease, which however made a devastating reappearance on the African continent 20 years later, in the 1980s. The international response to this resurgence of the disease was once again supported by the OIE's action, in particular the publication of recommended standards for the establishment of rinderpest epidemiological surveillance systems. This contained what was called the "OIE Procedure" for eligible Member Countries to be officially recognised as enjoying rinderpest-free status, which was adopted by the General Assembly of national delegates and which set out three steps that each infected country had to take in order to obtain such recognition by the OIE.

In parallel, the United Nations became very actively involved through the GREP – Global Rinderpest Eradication Programme – coordinated by the FAO in collaboration with the OIE and the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as of the 1990s, and with massive support to eligible countries from donors such as the European Union, with the aim of obtaining, by 2011 at the very latest, an official declaration of world rinderpest eradication, to be jointly proclaimed by the FAO and the OIE.

Today, 198 countries have been recognised as rinderpest-free by the OIE, with permanent support from the FAO, which represents all countries that have animals susceptible to the disease. This painstaking work was accomplished by OIE experts and officers in charge of recommending rinderpest-free recognition, who systematically verified the absence of rinderpest viral circulation in all countries concerned. This constitutes a major breakthrough, not only in the scientific field, but also for the policies of cooperation and coordination amongst international organisations and between those and the international community as a whole. It is, however, above all a success for veterinary services and the entire veterinary profession, especially since the scarcity of resources available to veterinary services in many infected countries constituted a major obstacle to the implementation of effective control strategies.

In many countries that have recently suffered from rinderpest, economic development was often affected by way their livestock sector performed in terms of production, animal health, and the quality and safety of their animal products; this performance is directly dependent on the quality of their national veterinary services. Over the years, the various successful rinderpest control campaigns have served to convince national and international decision-makers of the importance of reinforcing veterinary services in order to make them more effective in combating not only rinderpest but also all other animal diseases. Thus, the OIE is endeavouring to achieve recognition of veterinary services as a global public good, and to make their compliance with international standards a priority public investment area. In 2011, the official proclamation by the FAO and the OIE of planetary rinderpest eradication is a cause for celebration, and coincides with the 250th anniversary of the official creation of the veterinary profession. This is the first time an animal disease has been eradicated in the world, just as smallpox is the only human disease that has so far been eradicated by the medical profession.

There remains one last challenge: what is known as the post-eradication phase. Although the rinderpest virus no longer circulates amongst live animals, it is still present in certain laboratories, mainly for the production of vaccines in the event the disease were to reappear due to an accident or an act of bioterrorism. International coordination and cooperation will once again prove crucial in order to define acceptable conditions for the possession and use of the virus still present in laboratories. The OIE, in collaboration with the FAO and with Member Countries, is committed to ensuring that the process is carried out in a reliable and transparent manner.

The OIE, furthermore, is currently working on strategies to make progress in the international control, over the coming years, of other dreadful diseases such as foot and mouth disease, rabies, and peste des petits ruminants.

**Bernard Vallat**