



Access to regional and global markets for all: a new priority for the OIE

20/12/2008 The creation of the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) in 1924 gave the international community, well before the creation of the United Nations, a totally new tool for limiting the regional and global spread of contagious animal diseases. From the 28 founding countries, whose representatives are now hailed as visionaries, membership has since grown to 172. Though the OIE's initial objectives have been expanded, they remain just as relevant today.

In 1994, the founding countries of the World Trade Organization (WTO) gave the OIE a mandate to publish standards aimed at avoiding the introduction of pathogens via international trade in animals and animal products, while at the same time preventing countries from setting up unjustified sanitary barriers. The OIE was already doing this, but WTO recognition has enhanced the reputation of OIE standards still further.

In May 2005, the Delegates of Member Countries and Territories unanimously adopted the Fourth Strategic Plan, thereby confirming the broadening of the scope of the OIE's standards and guidelines to include animal welfare and animal production food safety. The OIE's *Terrestrial Code* and *Aquatic Code* contain all the standards democratically adopted by the Members of the OIE. Their companion volumes, the *Terrestrial Manual* and *Aquatic Manual*, specify reference techniques for diagnosing animal diseases and quality requirements for vaccines should they need to be used.

OIE standards can be categorised as either horizontal or vertical.

Horizontal standards are those dealing with generic aspects, such as ethics in international trade or the quality of national Veterinary Services, a *sine qua non* condition for importing countries to trust the reliability of health certificates accompanying consignments of animals and products in cross-border trade (these certificates must be issued exclusively by the Veterinary Services under the full responsibility of the government of the exporting country).

Vertical standards are those dealing directly with recommendations on each of the animal diseases and zoonoses (currently around one hundred diseases) listed by decision of the General Assembly of OIE Members. In most cases they include the methods to be applied by national Veterinary Services to conduct surveillance for these diseases, detect them more easily and control them, before a Member Country or Territory can, if appropriate, be considered free from a given disease.

In the majority of cases, chapters on a specific disease include recommendations aimed at avoiding any transboundary spread of the disease during the export of live animals or animal products such as meat, milk, hides and skins, wool, honey, etc. The risks do in fact differ according to the commodity in question and, in particular, according to the procedures they undergo to inactivate any harmful pathogens they may be carrying.

All these standards, prepared by leading international experts on the diseases in question, are democratically adopted by the General Assembly of OIE Members.

In the event of a trade dispute between Members over sanitary measures, the OIE is ready to act as a mediator, at the Members' request, using a science-based procedure involving these same experts. It is highly likely that, even if a dispute between Members were taken to the WTO level, these experts would again be called upon to give the same opinion.

OIE standards are now being prepared on the basis of a highly meticulous risk analysis taking into account the fact there is no such thing as zero risk. The wealth and range of the standards published in this way will undoubtedly enable importing countries to reduce the use of sometimes quite arbitrary risk analysis methods, and instead favour a more systematic use of OIE standards, in accordance with the WTO's SPS Agreement (1). There can be no doubt whatever that this development will mark a further step towards making world trade more open to all, thanks to better transparency when all are using the same standards.

We must nevertheless maintain our efforts to improve the presentation and exhaustiveness of the OIE's *Codes* and *Manuals*, and from now on this will be one of our Organisation's new priorities.

To facilitate the work of governments, Veterinary Services and the various operators, a more structured presentation of standards for each disease, applicable on the one hand to live animals and on the other hand to each of the different products, will gradually be introduced. Moreover, some chapters on specific diseases do not currently provide sufficiently detailed information on the innocuousness of certain products that have undergone processes to render them harmless, regardless of the animal health status of the exporting country. In this respect it is important to take into account the constantly evolving industrial and food technologies and the advances they offer in inactivating pathogens potentially present in food and in products intended for industry.

To this end, the OIE will bring its influence to bear on agrifood industries and research institutions to encourage the development of new research programmes to address unresolved issues of major importance to the development of world trade. For instance, a better knowledge of the conditions under which the foot and mouth disease virus survives or is killed during the meat maturing process might well have a major impact on the normative provisions and the way in which OIE Members apply the standards contained in the *Terrestrial Code* chapter on foot and mouth disease. This is an important issue, given that more than one hundred OIE Members are still infected with this disease.

The OIE will also do its utmost to induce a change of attitude on the part of certain importing countries that ban all imports from a country that has declared an epizootic disease. Though this approach is acceptable for a few days while awaiting more precise information on the animal health situation in the affected country, it should rapidly be replaced by protection measures based on OIE standards and recommendations for each of the commodities concerned. The decisions taken by some Members to impose a total ban on imports of animals and products without referring to the relevant provisions of the *Codes* for these commodities are wholly unacceptable.

Having said this, the OIE will do all in its power to avoid an approach based solely on the systematic inactivation of pathogens in products, which could lead Members to relax their surveillance for animal diseases and their policies on the prevention and control of potential biological disasters.

The positive impact of animal health policies on poverty reduction and public health is in itself ample justification for financing and maintaining surveillance networks and rapid response teams to deal with any recognised animal health threat.

To guarantee the effectiveness of surveillance at the national, regional and worldwide level, an inescapable pre-requisite is for all Members to comply with OIE standards on the quality and evaluation of Veterinary Services. In addition to their surveillance mission, the Veterinary Services are also responsible for the reliability of the veterinary certificates they issue. These certificates accompany every consignment of animals or animal products transported in international trade globally. Compliance with the OIE's standards of quality for the Veterinary Services ensures that these certificates are issued under conditions that guarantee their reliability, so that granting access to regional and global markets for all will not pose a threat to the safety of international trade in our globalised world.

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(1) Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO)