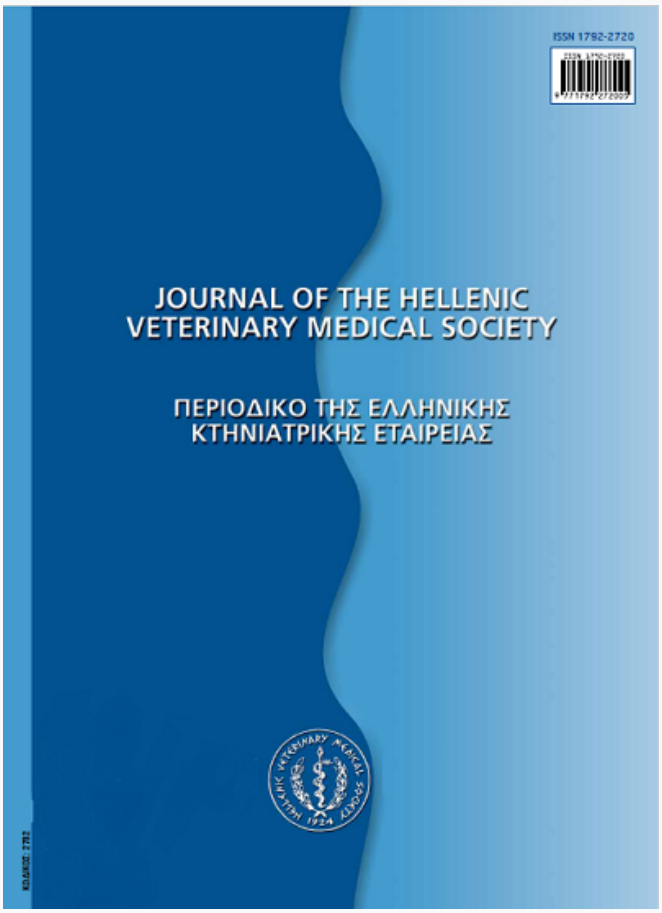
ePublishing

ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ
EKT NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Journal of the Hellenic Veterinary Medical Society

Vol 60, No 2 (2009)



Animal health and welfare measures in the EU

K. F. HOPPENSTEDT

doi: 10.12681/jhvms.14920

To cite this article:

HOPPENSTEDT, K. F. (2017). Animal health and welfare measures in the EU. *Journal of the Hellenic Veterinary Medical Society*, *60*(2), 121–124. https://doi.org/10.12681/jhvms.14920

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 05/09/2026 23:54:57

JOURNAL OF THE HELLENIC VETERINARY MEDICAL SOCIETY 2009, 60(2): 121-124
ΠΕΡΙΟΔΙΚΟ ΤΗΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΚΤΗΝΙΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ 2009, 60(2): 121-124

Animal health and welfare measures in the EU

Karsten-Friedrich Hoppenstedt
DrMedVet, Member of the European Parliament

About 75% of the new diseases that have affected humans over the past 10 years have been caused by pathogens originating from animals or from products of animal origin. Many of these diseases have the potential to spread through various means, even over long distances, and to become global problems.

Consequently, outbreaks of animal diseases can have devastating consequences not only for animal health and food supply, but also for economy and society as a whole. Some animal diseases also pose grave threats to human health the so called zoonoses, such as rabies, brucellosis, leishmaniasis and echinococcosis still occur in many countries especially in the developing world where they affect the poorest part of the population. They cause serious amounts of deaths and millions of affected people every year.

That is why I regard the prevention and control of animal diseases as a top priority for the EU and its institutions.

We have to reflect on the issue of biosecurity measures, which is no longer an issue of interest only for veterinarians and farmers, but also for the wider public, which is made clear by the unprecedented spread of certain diseases in recent years, for example avian influenza. As you can see, biosecurity is an important issue for veterinarians, farmers and EU citizens, because each and everyone can help to improve biosecurity, especially while traveling.

For example, when you take your pet across borders without following the strict EU regulations or bring home meat or dairy products from outside the EU, you risk importing an animal disease into the EU.

In addition, while animal diseases can have a remarkable impact on animal health, some also threaten public health. Indeed, most of the current emerging diseases are zoonoses – i.e. they affect both animals and humans. Examples include BSE, avian influenza etc.

Take the example of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE): first diagnosed in the UK in 1986, BSE reached epidemic proportions due to the unintended inclusion of meat and bone meal produced from infected animal carcasses in animal feed. There have been around 185.000 cases of BSE detected in the UK with 5.300 cases elsewhere in the EU.

Following the outbreak of BSE, farmers and industry suffered huge losses. In the UK, in addition to the cattle that have died because of BSE, another 4,4 million cattle had been put to death as a precautionary measure. Only for the UK, the costs for consumers due to compensation payments and financial aid for the beef industry were estimated over 5 billion (€6.3 billion). At no point the European Commission has stopped monitoring or stopped facing the challenge of BSE.

In addition to the measures and restrictions introduced to contain the animal disease, starting in March 1996 the Commission greatly increased its actions when the link between BSE and variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (vCJD) that affects human beings was made. From its first recognition until June 2008, 198 cases of vCJD heve been reported in the EU (from which 164 were reported in the UK).

Therefore, the EU has introduced a set of stringent Community measures. These measures concern all animal and public health risks resulting from various types of diseases and cover the entire chain of production. The EU has made great progress in its battle against BSE and the decrease of the number of reported cases can be taken as a proof of the efficacy of the stringent measures the EU has put into practice to tackle the disease.

This link between human and animal health, which becomes clear in the case of BSE, demonstrates the need for an approach that unifies veterinary and human medicine: Animals + Humans = One health, just like it was proclaimed by the European Commission.

Furthermore, biosecurity measures are important for a number of different diseases. Take the example of avian influenza – a highly contagious viral disease which appears primarily in poultry and other birds. On rare occasions, following close contact with infected birds, human can also contract the virus. During the early 2000's, the Asian H5N1 strain of avian influenza was responsible for many outbreaks worldwide – the first reported case was in East Asia in 2003. It then spread northwards and by the end of 2005, it finally reached Europe, affecting Croatia, Romania, Turkey, Ukraine and the European part of Russia. Many African and Middle Eastern countries started to report confirmed cases in 2006, and the disease was also detected in wild birds in a number of EU Member States and Balkan countries.

As a result, a decline in the consumption of poultry products, related to serious concerns in the food safety, occurred. The decline in the poultry sector, taken as an example, shows that diseases can have significant implications for the meat and the livestock industry. The outbreak in 2003 of another highly pathogenic avian influenza (H7N7 virus) in the Netherlands led to 30 million birds put to death. The direct economic costs were estimated at more than _150 million. Avian influenza has caused a severe blow to the economy of certain South-East Asian countries in which the disease is endemic. Following the 2003-2004 outbreaks of H5N1, the total losses in gross domestic profit (GDP), as a result of the damage in the poultry sector in Asia, amounted to almost €8 billion. The affection of human beings can also be reported: until June 2008, 385 confirmed cases of humans infected with avian influenza and 243 deaths have been reported and confirmed by the World Health Organization.

Due to the measures taken into action by the EU, the losses in the European poultry sector have been far lower compared to that in Asia.

In addition, the legislation in this area has been complemented by emergency measures to guarantee a quick, efficient and coherent response to outbreaks like contingency plans and stocks of vaccines. There are EU rules on how to transport farm animals, to protect their welfare and prevent the spread of diseases, for example. These rules cover both when and for how long animals can be transported, and also the requirements including proper health certification. Concerning biosecurity at borders, there are strict EU rules which products of animal origin travelers can bring into the EU and how to bring in pets.

Member States are ultimately responsible for biosecurity, both at farm level and borders. They have the duty to protect citizens from potential animal and public health risks. Therefore, they implement and enforce measures adopted at EU level. They decide on issues as how to train the relevant authorities concerning the different laws and how they should be implemented in practice, for example when to check baggage at airports; how to provide information to stakeholders (farmers, veterinarians and travelers, for example) within the borders; and what penalties should be applied if rules are broken.

What, therefore, is the benefit of EU action?

Since animal diseases do not make a stop borders, a coordinated strategy at EU level based on cooperation between all Member States is more efficient and effective than individually guided national approaches. Harmonized legislation, enforced in each Member State, not only guarantees a high degree of preparedness for potential disease outbreaks, ensures equal standards of protection for all EU citizens, but it also leads to effective cooperation between Member States on the prevention of diseases and control measures. In addition, the free circulation of products of animal origin and of live animals within the EU is allowed.

With close contact and collaboration with non-EU countries and international organizations, the EU aims to reduce the global threat of animal diseases. The European Commission is in regular contact and information exchange with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), as well as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Different Committees support the European Commission in their task and try to enable rapid communication and the adoption of laws. The Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health is the main committee for areas relating to food law, which also implies animal health and welfare. The confidence between Member States is increasing due to regular meetings of this committee, which bears the burden that all necessary measures are taken quickly and allow a prompt and efficient reaction to new outbreaks of diseases in the EU. Furthermore, the EU

not only provides financial aid to affected countries, but also shares its expertise with partners across the globe.

The Food and Veterinary Office's main goal (FVO) is to assure effective control systems and to observe EU standards in the EU and in third countries exporting to the EU. To assure an effective system of control, the FVO carries out inspections in Member States and third countries, exporting to the EU. It is part of the Directorate - General for Health and Consumer Protection of the Commission. The Staff is organized in six units with different responsibilities, like developing country profiles or improving animal health and welfare. At the moment, more than 160 people from all Member States of the EU work for the FVO and of these, there are over 80 inspectors, who participate in on the spot inspection missions. To achieve their goal, they develop inspection programmes; identify priority areas and countries for inspection. The results of each inspection are carried out in inspection reports, including conclusions and recommendations for the Member State concerned. The Office also highlights areas, where the Commission may need to clarify or improve legislation.

Within the area of food safety, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is a corner stone of EU risk assessment regarding food and feed safety. The EFSA works closely together with national authorities and has open consultation with stakeholders and is therefore able to independent scientific advices on existing and emerging risks. The European Commission's "Better Training for Safer Food", a trainee initiative dealing with food and feed law, animal health and welfare, as well as plant health rules, trains Member States and the national authority staff involved, in official controls in these areas.

The EU also stands up for research to develop new methods to limit the effects of animal diseases. The goal is to provide the public with information about potential risks of diseases, which is accomplished by up-to-date reports and detailed information on precautionary measures.

The new Animal Health Strategy:

The new Animal Health Strategy of the European Union provides the framework of animal health and welfare measures during the next six years. The goals of the strategy are based on the results of an extensive evaluation and a large stakeholder's consultation. The principle that "prevention is better than cure" can be considered as the major guideline of the strategy. The aim is to put greater focus on precautionary measures like the supervision of diseases, regular controls and research, in order to reduce occurrences of animal diseases and to keep the negative effects of an outbreak at a low.

The new strategy includes way more than just the control of animal diseases, however. It also focuses on issues which are inevitable linked to animal health, such as public health, food safety, animal welfare, sustainable development and research.

The priorities of the strategy are going to be re-evaluated to guarantee that funding and resources are employed in areas of most benefit to European citizens. Everyone involved in the subject of animal health will be assigned with clearly defined responsibilities to ensure that the goals of the new strategy are achieved. The result of the strategy is an animal health policy that is not only robust, but also efficient and effective.

- The European Commission adopted a Communication laying down the Action Plan for the implementation of the EU's animal health strategy on 10 September 2008 [COM(2008) 545 final]. The Action Plan contains an overview and summary of the key actions.

- A programming document for the Strategy was also agreed. That contains all the actions and their relevant details, such as milestones marking important steps within the actions, organizations involved and orientate date for the completion of each action.

- The information based on the programming document and presented under the different pillars below is updated regularly to enable any interested person, organisation or other parties to follow the progress of the different activities.

The fundamental principles of that Action Plan are:

1. Defining Priorities

To define priorities is a fundamental principle in a world that changes considerably in the course of time. Diseases, such as SSE, for example, which threatened animal and human health over ten years ago, are now of much lower risk due to the different measures taken into action by the European Commission. Nevertheless, there are new and emerging challenges to face, such as diseases that become more prevalent thanks to

global warming.

In short, there is a need to re-evaluate priorities based on careful risk assessment and solid scientific advice. The profiling and categorization of biological and chemical risks will provide the basis for prioritization. The focus should be on diseases with high public relevance regarding their potential impact on human health, society and/or the economy.

2. A Modern Legal Framework

As I said before, the main goal of the new Animal Health strategy is to develop a clear structure for animal health in the EU. The legislation right now that deals with animal health covers many different policy areas: intra-community trade, imports, animal disease control, animal nutrition and animal welfare. The aim is to replace these interrelated policies by a single regulatory framework. Additionally, the framework will converge, as far as possible, with the international recommendations, standards and guidelines of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and Codex Alimentarius, the food standard-setting body created by the UN. Furthermore, a harmonized EU framework for responsibility- and cost-sharing will be developed.

3. Threat, Prevention, Surveillance and Emergency Preparedness

Identifying problems before they emerge while being ready to manage outbreaks and crises is a major EU objective. In order to be able to keep out diseases from a herd, biosecurity measures, like isolation, are very helpful. Threat prevention and crisis management are supported by mechanism of supervision, such as the EU traceability framework. The framework comprises identification systems, labelling and TRACES (the Community TRAde Control and Expert System for traceability). Its goal is to improve the quality, accuracy, availability and timeliness of data on living animals, food of animal origin, both, within countries and across Member State borders.

The focus on import controls will be on high risk imports. Furthermore, new efforts will be made to help non- EU- countries to contain the threat of animal diseases and to improve health and food safety at the source. It is also planned to set up more strict rules against the illegal trade of animals.

In case of emergency it is highly important that the EU is able to take quick decisions to limit and to control animal-related threats at EU level. The EU has put in place measures, such as the establishment of a rapid response network, crisis management units and an EU veterinary rapid response team, as well as the reinforcement of EU antigen and vaccine banks.

4. Science, Innovation and Research

The fundament of the new Animal Health policy is science- and it will be on the basis of solid scientific advice and information that future animal health rules are developed. With that in mind, the EU is going to support scientific innovation and research, so it ensures sufficient funding in this area through public-private partnerships.

Through the new strategy, the network of national reference laboratories will be further developed, thereby maximising the knowledge and expertise that exists in Europe. The activities of the European Food Safety Authority in the field of animal health will also be increased, whereas the work of the Community Reference Laboratories will be re-evaluated.

The 7th Research Framework Programme (2007-2013) runs parallel to the new animal health strategy and is an important tool in supporting research regarding animal health and welfare issues. The Programme will make a contribution in increasing the EU's reputation on the international stage and support the EU in resolving differences with trading partners. It will also be the key to maintain a high level of consumer confidence and trust across the EU.

Public health and potential problems can be considered as international issues of high importance. Countries alone, even the more developed ones, are not able to cope with communicable diseases in general and zoonoses in particular. New challenges have to be faced by effective surveillance networks, which are not limited to only one country, but Europe as a whole and also provide the development of human and technical resources for rapid response to epidemics. ■