AnimalhealthEurope Position
Animal Disease Prevention, Preparedness and Response

January 2025

Background

Transboundary and emerging animal diseases have been increasing in occurrence over the past decades. Diseases which were once only reported outside of Europe's borders are now more frequently occurring on European soil, and not solely in the continent's southern climes. When a new disease outbreak is serious enough to impact food production and the agricultural economy, very often the first reaction is for authorities to contact veterinary medicines manufacturers to request rapid development of vaccines to address the outbreak.

In 2024 the reactive approach to disease prevention was relatively sufficient as vaccines existed already for avian influenza, foot-and-mouth disease was contained – not without consequences - and the strain of bluetongue virus (BTv3) was known to the animal health industry, although no vaccines were available at the time of the outbreak in the Netherlands. In the case of bluetongue, the animal health sector swiftly developed and distributed the much-needed vaccines to limit the impact of this outbreak on the Europe's farming sector.

It is only a question of time until the next outbreak occurs - be it a known or a new disease.

Relying on the reactive approach may not be the best strategy to protect Europe's animals – and maybe even our human population - from the next inevitable disease outbreak. We need a fundamental shift from a "firefighting" approach to a "fire prevention" approach. Otherwise, the consequences of a future outbreak could spiral beyond our control, dealing a serious blow to European agriculture, public health, and the wider economy.

The challenge with today's animal health policies

The EU already has legislation on transmissible animal diseases, but legislation alone cannot protect against the impacts of animal disease outbreaks as we have witnessed over the past years. Animal diseases, just like diseases affecting people do not respect borders. They can occur when animals are transported, and their spread can be fuelled by climate change, and movement of people, etc. Whereas Member State action is necessary, the risk of transmission to other countries suggest that more diseases should be considered for control at EU level.

Furthermore, current EU trade policies do not support a pro-vaccination approach, and uptake of vaccine use amongst farmers is not a given. So, when authorities send urgent requests for a vaccine to be developed and supplied only after the emergence of an outbreak, it is both challenging from a timing and resources perspective for animal health companies to act within the required timeframe to immediately address the outbreak, but also creates a certain level of risk if the return on investment is not guaranteed in case of non-use.

The way forward

As such, AnimalhealthEurope proposes four points for decision-makers to take into consideration to ensure a ‘fire prevention’ rather than ‘firefighting’ approach when it comes to animal health:

1. **Establish a regular dialogue between the animal health industry and veterinary authorities**

A structured partnership where industry and the authorities can anticipate demand and increase preparedness, to ensure predictable risks are addressed in a timely manner would generate and build trust. Regular exchanges of information, particularly for known diseases where data is available, would allow for rough calculations on potential disease occurrence and possible impacts.

Ideally, risk sharing or incentivising mechanisms could be proposed to support industry in the fast response to an outbreak, and to support farmers with uptake to protect their animals. Response could be further supported by adapted regulatory pathways with quicker authorisation processes aligned with specific needs.

2. **Develop a dedicated rapid alert and response mechanism**

To gain valuable time, at the first signs of a transboundary animal disease (TAD) outbreak, the CVO(s) of the country(ies) concerned could liaise directly with the industry association to set up an urgent meeting to decide in partnership on the response required.

3. **Guarantee an Animal Health Law that is fit for future challenges**

With the European Commission currently evaluating Regulation (EU) 2016/429 on transmissible animal diseases (the so-called "Animal Health Law"), this is a key opportunity to address unresolved challenges and better protect Europe against future animal disease outbreaks.

Given the dynamic nature of animal health and emerging infectious diseases, it is imperative to ensure that the opportunity to frequently revisit and potentially update the list of designated diseases to better address evolving threats. Further consideration should also be given to the creation of antigen, vaccine and diagnostic reagent banks to enhance the EU’s preparedness and response mechanisms.

4. **Ensure European coordination for animal vaccination**

Currently, Member States respond in different ways to one disease that impacts their territories. This not only limits intra-EU movement of animals, but it can in some cases prolong the occurrence of the disease in Europe.

A coordinated EU response to animal disease outbreaks, for example through vaccination campaigns, as some Member States have called for previously (Agrifish, October 2024), would support a more measured and effective approach .

In conclusion

Keeping animals healthy and avoiding mass culls of animals should be top priorities for EU decision-makers. Animal diseases, particularly those with high rates of morbidity or mortality, can have dire consequences in a first instance for the animals, but also for our

food supply and affordability, on the socio-economic future of Europe's farming communities, on antibiotic use, on farmers' mental health, and on public health.

In the case of known diseases, surveillance data is available which could allow for rough predictions of the likelihood of disease occurrence and potential impacts, forming a baseline for regular discussions between the animal health industry and the authorities. And in the case of emerging diseases, having this mechanism already in place can only serve to enhance Europe's health emergency preparedness and response.