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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Council

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Subject: Ministerial Conference on “biosecurity and vaccination: essential tools in prevention, control and eradication of animal diseases” (Brussels, 24 January 2024): lessons learned and the way forward“  
*- Information from the Presidency*

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Delegations will find in the Annex a note from the Presidency on the above-mentioned subject which will be dealt with under "Any other business" at the Council meeting ("Agriculture and Fisheries") on 26 February 2024.

**Ministerial Conference “biosecurity and vaccination: essential tools in prevention, control and eradication of animal diseases” (Bruxelles, 24 January 2024): lessons-learned and way forward“**

*Information from the Presidency*

**Introduction**

During this semester the Belgian Presidency aims to focus on prevention and vaccination in the domain of animal health. As the program points out, this is not only focused on the current epidemics as HPAI and ASF, but as well on other animal diseases as IBR, BVD or Aujeszky’s disease. The pillars of the Belgian Presidency, “protect – strengthen – prepare”, can be translated as follows in the animal health sector: protect more animals, strengthen farmers and prepare Member states or zones for upgrading their animal health status.

This focus has notably been illustrated during the Conference that the Belgian Presidency organized with stakeholders and Member states on 24 January 2024 regarding “biosecurity and vaccination: essential tools in prevention, control and eradication of animal diseases”.

The Belgian Presidency concludes that biosecurity and vaccination are two tools that must become the pillars of alternative strategies to mass slaughter in the management of infectious epidemics on farms.

As an example of this priority, the Belgian Presidency would like to introduce reflection regarding the possibility to use marker vaccines while obtaining or maintaining a disease free status.

## **Conclusions of the Ministerial conference “biosecurity and vaccination: essential tools in prevention, control and eradication of animal diseases” held on 24 January 2024**

In recent years, several diseases appeared in Europe : lumpy skin disease, sheep and goat pox virus, epizootic haemorrhagic disease. Avian Influenza and African swine fever are of a continuous concern for the farmers and broader society in the EU but also beyond. Exotic diseases are no more so exotic. These diseases have impacts on animal health and on economy, and in case of Avian influenza, also potentially on human health.

There is a need of continuous common effort and cooperation to tackle the challenges of these diseases, and in exploring a better use of preventive tools to avoid outbreaks, while applying strict disease control measures when the diseases occur.

The combination of constant proper biosecurity, coupled with reliable surveillance for early detection of diseases, and vaccination are the recipe for the high level of preparedness and prevention needed to meet the evolving challenges.

Biosecurity measures in farms and along production chains remain the primary line of defense. Biosecurity relates to both management, behavioral and physical measures and is not automatically synonymous with major investment. It is often based on application of fundamental practices such as hand washing and disinfection, systematically washing the boots and changing the clothes before entering the barns, preventing the contact with wild animals together with intelligently managing movements (“all in - all out”).

Modern tools (bio-check UGent...) aiming at measuring the level of biosecurity of the farm seem to be the next step. It will help farmers to identify possibility of improvement and allows competent authority to more risk-based their actions.

Biosecurity not only plays a role in the prevention and control of animal diseases, but it also contributes to the reduction of the use of antimicrobials and to preservation of animal welfare. It is, after all, amongst key elements of the One Health approach.

However, experience taught us that even with sophisticated biosecurity in place, viruses manage to enter and to infect animals. Vaccination plays a key role here.

From 2023, European legislation has set the principles and the rules, based on science and in line with international standards for implementing vaccination against several disease. EU Member States have now the possibility to use vaccination, as a complementary tool to prevent or control Avian Influenza. Some Member States are starting to gain experience with using vaccination, through implementation of a vaccination plan or through vaccination trials. The data collected will allow us to fine-tune our vaccination strategy.

The need to use vaccination as widely as possible, both in Europe and the rest of the world has thus been established. This tool will help to reduce the circulation of the virus, limit the number of outbreaks and the consequences of eradication measures. While this is important for Europe, it is vital for developing countries, where avian influenza represents an even greater threat to public health and food safety.

The Belgian Presidency concluded that Member states need to work together, with trading partners, to remove the obstacles, particularly economic ones, that currently hinder the use of preventive vaccination against avian influenza. Action are need, as part of a One Health approach, to stimulate the widely use of the tools that are now available to us: biosecurity, vaccination and surveillance.

## **Use of vaccination in the process of granting and maintaining disease free status under the Animal Health Law**

Regulation 2016/429 on transmissible animal diseases and amending and repealing certain acts in the area of animal health ('Animal Health Law') and its Delegated Regulation 2020/689 as regards rules for surveillance, eradication programmes, and disease-free status for certain listed and emerging diseases.

The goal of the Animal health Law is better prevention than cure. In this, Member States can start programmes to eradicate animal diseases listed as C-category disease in order to obtain the free status. The benefits can be multiple, such as less underlying infections, better immunity of the herds and easier trade with other Member States with similar health status. At the same time, such programmes are requesting a significant effort of all animal holders together with their veterinarians, animal health organizations and the animal health administration. Most relevant C-category diseases are IBR and BVD for bovines as well as Aujeszky's disease for pigs.

By the end of such program, it creates under the measures of Implementing Regulation 2020/689 a situation in which for 2 years no vaccination is allowed although the virus can still be around as p.e. for IBR 99.8% of the establishments and 99.9% of the bovine population should be free of IBR and neighboring countries do not always have the same status. When the free status is granted, no vaccination is allowed anymore. With the characteristics of this virus, it creates an enormous risk for free establishments to have a naïve population with possible sources for infection around. The effect is that less animal holders and less Member States will go for an upgrade on their animal health status. As such it is paradoxical to the initiating goal of the Animal Health Law.

Marker vaccines offer the opportunity to detect and remove infected animals, while protecting the non-infected animals. DIVA tests have been used successfully in the eradication programs for IBR and Aujeszky's diseases for a number of years. They combine a good sensitivity and specificity and they are safe.

Therefore, the Belgian Presidency asks to reconsider the conditions for granting and maintaining a disease free status to an establishment as well as a Member State or a zone foreseen in Implementing Regulation 2020/689 towards the possibility to use marker vaccines while obtaining or maintaining a disease free status. This is certainly valid for IBR and Aujeszky's disease, but can be used as well for BVD if such vaccines are available. Not only the risk of propagation of diseases will be reduced, which can only increase the country's overall animal health level, but also the cost for surveillance.

