New animal health strategy for the European Union (2007-2013)

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted the own-initiative report by Janusz **WOJCIECHOWSKI** (UEN, PL) on a new Animal Health Strategy for the European Union (2007-2013).

MEPs support the objectives and principles set out in the Animal Health Strategy Communication and call upon the Commission to present an action plan. They note, however, that it is impossible to comply with the 2007-2013 timeframe laid down in Animal Health Strategy Communication given that the discussions relating to the Communication are still on-going and the basic legislation required for its implementation will not be in place until 2010 at the earliest. Therefore, they call for greater ambition and a longer-term view from the Commission when bringing forward its legislative proposals.

MEPs criticise the Commission for making no reference to the funding requirements for its policy in its Communication, since the proposed strategy can only produce positive results if clear and transparent arrangements are laid down for the funding of the individual measures. They highlight that increased financial support will be necessary, particularly in the strengthening of surveillance systems and biosecurity measures. MEPs also express their dissatisfaction at the indications that individual measures will be financed from existing funds and call on the Commission to advocate enhancing the possibilities of the current veterinary fund.

Pillar 1 – Prioritisation of EU intervention: MEPs acknowledge the crucial importance of risk profiling and categorisation, including the determination of an acceptable level of risk for the Community and the creation of a series of precise measures to reduce the risk.

The report points out that high stocking densities in intensive farming systems may increase the risk of disease spread and hamper disease control where inadequate disease control measures are practised. It also highlights the importance, in terms of controlling epidemic diseases, of the distance between farms.

The EU has put in place strict regulations on animal transport, which meet the need for high animal welfare standards and disease prevention and control measures. MEPs insist that those high standards be fully implemented by all Member States. Countries exporting animal products to the EU should also meet these standards so as to promote and ensure high standards of animal welfare and health globally.

Pillar 2 – EU legal framework: MEPs share the view that the current EU animal health framework is complicated and fragmented and thus needs to be simplified. They believe that the fundamental rules governing action on animal health should, where possible, be set out in a single legislative act.

The report highlights that the EU legal framework should clearly, and in an appropriately flexible manner, lay down the obligations of owners of animals, including animals kept for non-commercial purposes, in risk situations, in such a way as not to give rise to unwarranted conflicts and disputes.

MEPs call on the Commission to carry out a comparative analysis of existing compensation systems in the Member States and, on that basis, to draw up an EU-wide framework model. The Commission is asked to create a legal framework for an efficient cost-sharing scheme in the Member States in order to ensure that the direct costs for eradicating an animal disease are also co-financed by the sector. MEPs indicate the need for a substantial Community contribution in respect of those major diseases, in order to ensure equal treatment and opportunities where these are beyond the resources of the countries and producers concerned.

The parliamentary committee urges the EU to defend its high animal health and welfare standards at international level within the WTO, in order to increase animal health and welfare standards globally. It welcomes the proposed steps towards an export strategy at Community level and stresses that the Commission should make every effort to improve access to third-country markets and remove export barriers.

Pillar 3 – Animal-related threat prevention, surveillance and crisis preparedness: the parliamentary committee acknowledges the need to promote on-farm biosecurity measures. In this respect, measures such as the isolation of new animals brought to farms, the isolation of sick animals and regulating the movement of people, can have a major impact in restricting the spread of disease.

In order to improve traceability, MEPs support action covering the compulsory electronic and DNA-based genetic identification and registration of animals at EU-level and the introduction of a comprehensive and secure animal movement monitoring system. The Commission is called to help farmers cope with the high costs incurred through the procurement of the required equipment, by creating the possibility for Member States to incorporate such measures within their rural development programmes.

In view of the risk of infection-carrying or diseased animals being brought into the EU, veterinary and sanitary checks at EU borders need to be particularly thorough and stringent, in order to prevent the illegal importation of or trafficking in animals and animal products. In this respect, MEPs draw attention to the need for organisational, training and financial assistance to be provided to veterinary services at the EU's external borders, in particular in the new Member States, third countries neighbouring the EU, and developing countries.

In addition, the report stresses the need for economic operators, members of the veterinary profession and their assistants, control bodies and other competent authorities to be provided with effective training to enable them to detect animal-related threats promptly and for an update of EU minimum standards on veterinary training. MEPs support such training at EU level and suggest that a European accreditation system of veterinary schools could help achieving the objective of a high-level veterinary education.

Lastly, MEPs support action to increase the use of (both suppressive and protective) emergency vaccinations, and believe that it is crucial to expand EU vaccine banks. They call for: (i) a ban on consumer labelling of products derived from vaccinated animals; (ii) the definition of an effective public communication strategy regarding the harmlessness of products derived from vaccinated animals; (iii) the conclusion of conventions on the free circulation of products derived from vaccinated animals between governments, farmers' organisations, consumer organisations, and retail and trade operators.

Pillar 4 – Science, Innovation and Research: MEPs recall Parliament's amendment to the 2008 EU budget, which increased appropriations for the development of (marker) vaccines and testing methods. They call on the Commission to make effective use of those increased appropriations.

The report points to the need for the strengthening of the network of Community and national reference laboratories dealing with animal diseases. It emphasises the importance of pooling scientific information on animal health and welfare, as well as the importance of communicating with consumers, in order to ensure that they understand the means by which animal diseases are spread and their enormous impact.

MEPs are concerned that European standards could be undermined by imports from third countries whose farmers do not face the same obligations with regard to animal health and welfare. The Commission is called upon to investigate ways in which to safeguard against such third-country competition, including consideration of import measures, and by raising the matter for debate in the relevant WTO fora.

Lastly, the report points out that the new generation of Free Trade Agreements with India, Korea and the countries of South-East Asia should have a balanced chapter on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and animal welfare. The Commission is asked to conclude veterinary protocols with potential export markets, such as that of China.