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

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The European Parliament adopted, by 482 votes to 9 and 16 abstentions, a resolution on the Commission Communication on a new animal health strategy for the European Union 2007-2013. The own initiative report had been tabled for consideration in plenary by Janusz **WOJCIECHOWSKI** (UEN, PL), on behalf of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development.

Parliament welcomes the development of a strategic approach to EU animal health policy, but calls for greater ambition and for a longer-term view from the Commission when bringing forward its legislative proposals.

Members point out that the proposed strategy can produce positive results if clear and transparent arrangements are laid down for the funding of the individual measures, something that the Animal Health Strategy Communication fails to do. They criticise the Commission for making no reference to the funding requirements for its policy in the Communication. Parliament draws attention to the fact that the common animal health policy is one of the most integrated EU policies and that most of its funding should be covered by the Community budget, which should not preclude the financial responsibility of the Member States and of farmers. Parliament is dissatisfied about the indications that individual measures will be financed from existing funds, and calls on the Commission to advocate enhancing the possibilities of the current veterinary fund, preparing its arguments for the budget discussions that will be launched in 2009. It points out that the animal health strategy should also cover the activities of abattoirs, animal transport businesses and animal feed manufacturers and suppliers, while taking account of the need for administrative simplification.

Pillar 1 – Prioritisation of EU intervention: Parliament acknowledges the crucial importance of risk profiling and categorisation, including the determination of an acceptable level of risk for the Community and of the relative priority for action to reduce the risk. It believes that efforts must be made to define clearly the situations in which the risk of disease is heightened and exceeds the acceptable level, as well as the consequences. It 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 and that the same could happen in other farming systems if disease control measures are not well implemented. It also highlights the importance, in terms of controlling epidemic diseases, of the distance between farms.

Members point to the potentially heightened risks involved in the long-distance transport of live animals. They consider that sanitary and animal welfare rules concerning the transport of live animals should be intensely controlled and tightened if deemed necessary, and call for the swift introduction of an integrated electronic European animal registration system, including GPS tracking of lorries. They believes that the quality of transport is more important than its duration for animal welfare.

Pillar 2 – EU legal framework: Members share the view that the current EU animal health framework needs to be simplified. The fundamental rules governing action on animal health should, where possible, be set out in a single legislative act. 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. Parliament acknowledges the need to revise the current co-financing instrument, so that it is possible to ensure that all players assume their responsibilities and play a part in detecting and eradicating

disease. The compensation system should not be limited to providing compensation to owners of animals that are culled in response to the outbreak of disease, but should be combined with risk-prevention incentives based on a reduction in contributions to national or regional animal health funds by farmers who take extra risk reducing measures and promoting the use of (emergency) vaccination instead of stamping out. Parliament agrees that provision should be made in the EU legal framework for support for the possibility of covering indirect losses not resulting from disease-eradication measures alone, and points out that indirect losses can, in some cases, be more severe than direct losses, and that provision should therefore be made for compensation for those losses.

The resolution goes on to stress the importance of the consistent application of the precautionary principle with respect to the reintroduction of animal protein into feed, and the need for greater efforts to introduce effective control and monitoring mechanisms on the elimination of all pathogens during manufacture, to ensure traceability and to avoid the contamination and mixing of types of animal meal in feed. Parliament urges the EU to defend its high animal health and welfare standards at international level within the World Trade Organization, in order to increase animal health and welfare standards globally. It acknowledges that EU producers face higher costs due to the higher EU standards in place and that they must be protected from imported animal products whose production is subject to lower standards.

Pillar 3 – Animal-related threat prevention, surveillance and crisis preparedness: Parliament 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, 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 resolution 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.

Parliament points to the need to strengthen 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. It strongly believes that the cloning of animals for economic purposes should be banned.

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, Parliament 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.