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# Liberalization of animal health requirements for the international trade of animals and animal products

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**SUMMARY** - The Office International des Epizooties (OIE), the world organization for animal health, was prepared to assume the role designated to it by the World Trade Organization (WTO): that of reference organization for animal health for the WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS). One of the OIE's three main aims since its establishment 72 years ago is to harmonize regulations for the international trade of animals and their products. To this end, the OIE produces two periodically updated volumes: the *International Animal Health Code* and the *Manual of Standards for Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines*. Both publications are prepared by specialists whose contributions are agreed upon by the official Veterinary Services of the 144 Member Countries. The *Code* describes, among other relevant subjects, the import/export requirements for animals and animal products with regard to over 80 diseases important for trade, and the *Manual* provides the diagnostic and vaccine requirements for these diseases. Food standards under the SPS are addressed by the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission. An internationally recognized list of foot and mouth disease free countries and zones within countries has been initiated. With this global approach, the organization fully and transparently participates in facilitating trade while protecting animal and human health.

**Key words:** Animal health, Manual, OIE.

**RESUME** - "Libéralisation des exigences zoosanitaires pour le commerce international des animaux et des produits d'origine animale". En tant qu'organisation mondiale de la santé animale, l'OIE était appelé à devenir l'organisme de référence en matière zoosanitaire, désigné par l'Organisation Mondiale du Commerce dans le cadre de l'accord sur les mesures sanitaires et phytosanitaires (Accord SPS). Depuis sa création il y a 72 ans, l'OIE compte parmi ses trois objectifs principaux l'harmonisation des réglementations relatives au commerce international des animaux et des produits d'origine animale. A cet effet, l'OIE édite deux ouvrages, périodiquement remis à jour : le "Code Zoosanitaire International" et le "Manuel des Normes pour les tests de diagnostic et les vaccins". Ces deux ouvrages sont rédigés par des spécialistes dont les textes sont approuvés par les services vétérinaires officiels des 144 Pays Membres de l'OIE. A côté d'autres aspects essentiels, le "Code" décrit les obligations liées à plus de 80 maladies importantes sur le plan commercial, et applicables à l'importation et à l'exportation des animaux et des produits d'origine animale. Le "Manuel" précise les obligations relatives au diagnostic de ces maladies et aux vaccinations correspondantes. Les normes alimentaires relevant de l'accord SPS sont définies par la Commission du Codex Alimentarius de la FAO/OMS. Une liste préliminaire internationalement reconnue de pays et de zones indemnes de fièvre aphteuse a été dressée. Grâce à cette approche globale, l'organisation contribue pleinement à faciliter le commerce tout en respectant la transparence et en protégeant la santé animale et humaine.

**Mots-clés :** Santé animale, Manuel, OIE.

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It is clear that animal diseases are a major constraint to the international marketing of animals, meat, and other animal products. Some of the most important epizootic diseases for which countries have made huge efforts to prevent and/or control can be transmitted not only by animals but also by meat. In response to 'globalization of the economy', national livestock producers are not prepared to let their Veterinary Services risk unrestricted importation of animals and animal products when, in their own interest and often at great expense, they support and cooperate with disruptions to national trade in order to control important diseases.

The international community, however, strongly supports loosening of trade restrictions as evidenced by the considerable country participation in the newly established World Trade Organization (WTO). In addition to benefiting consumers, the WTO aims to obtain a proper balance between protecting producers and allowing them the opportunity to profit from increased international

trade. For agricultural producers one of the most important associated agreements signed upon establishment of the WTO was the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS).

The SPS states, among other things, that for trade purposes animal health measures established by countries to ensure the protection of human and animal life and health should be based on international standards, guidelines and recommendations developed under the auspices of the OIE. The OIE, the world organization for animal health, was uniquely prepared to assume this role.

The OIE is the organization of the official Veterinary Services of 144 countries. In the 72 years since its establishment, its three principal aims have remained unchanged: the provision of information on animal health worldwide, the coordination of research on and control of important animal diseases, and the harmonization of the regulations for international trade in animals and animal products. The methods by which these aims are accomplished have, however, evolved and will continue to do so at an accelerated pace. It was mainly due to its work over the years in harmonizing trade regulations that the OIE was designated as the WTO-SPS reference organization for animal health. Food standards under the SPS are addressed by the joint FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission.

The OIE *International Animal Health Code* is a continuously updated volume containing internationally agreed import/export requirements for trade in animals and animal products. A companion volume, the *Manual of Standards for Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines*, is also regularly updated and contains the agreed scientific support information for those requirements. The *Manual* is in reality the main international harmonizing text for the diagnosis of the most important transmissible animal diseases.

The procedure for updating these two volumes assures international scientific and regulatory consensus. An International Animal Health Code Commission, the members of which are chosen by the world's Veterinary Services, meets twice annually to propose amendments to the *Code* resulting from Member Country concerns and/or new information on the diseases. All Member Countries are asked to comment on or contribute to new or revised draft chapters regarding import and export requirements before these are adopted by the OIE.

In addition to chapters on important animal diseases, the *Code* also has sections on other subjects relevant to trade, such as disease reporting, certification, import/export procedures and import risk analysis. As with many subjects, the chapter on risk analysis is currently being updated and expanded. This risk analysis chapter includes articles on risk assessment, evaluation of Veterinary Services, zoning and regional, and surveillance and monitoring. The SPS agreement recognizes that sanitary requirements more stringent than those otherwise agreed to in the *Code* or *Manual* may be justified. An objective and transparent risk assessment, however, should be carried out to justify these requirements.

Similarly the Standards Commission requires that the *Manual* is scrutinized by experts before its 101 chapters on diagnostic techniques and standards for vaccines for the most important livestock and poultry diseases are periodically revised in light of new scientific findings. Diagnostic tests for diseases are classified according to their degree of reliability for international trade. The *Manual* also contains internationally agreed chapters on subjects such as test validation and sampling methods, good laboratory practice, quality assurance and biotechnology. In addition to the requirements for vaccines published in the *Manual*, regional initiatives for harmonization of vaccines are increasingly supported by the OIE.

A growing number of genuinely internationally validated diagnostic reference reagents for the most important animal diseases for trade are being made available by OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres. The distribution of well-characterized and documented primary reference sera is expected to greatly increase confidence in trade between countries. The internationally designated experts of these Reference Laboratories are expected to be valuable resources for the OIE's role in supporting the WTO.

Two other OIE publications, the *International Aquatic Animal Health Code* and the *Diagnostic Manual for Aquatic Animal Diseases*, provide similar assurances for the increasingly important trade in fish, molluscs and crustaceans.

The Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) and Other Epizootics Commission has added a responsibility to its duties that will assist trade: a list of internationally recognized FMD-free countries and zones within countries has been initiated.

Another initiative aimed at harmonizing trade criteria has been the establishment of internationally recommended standards for epidemiological surveillance systems for rinderpest and contagious bovine pleuropneumonia -with which countries follow time-bound steps to verify freedom from disease and infection for these two important diseases.

Several publications directly relevant to the trade in animals and their products are available not only to official Veterinary Services but to anyone with an interest in considering international marketing. Some of these are also immediately available through the OIE web site, such as weekly updates of the most important reported animal disease outbreaks, a worldwide resume of the previous year's global animal health situation, a list of countries and zones within countries recognized as being free from FMD, and the *International Animal Health Code*. ([www.oie.int](http://www.oie.int)).

Colleagues from the veterinary departments of other international organizations such as the FAO, WHO and the Mediterranean Zoonoses Control Centre participate along with experts from Member Countries in the work of the OIE thus assuring that there are complementary efforts and that Veterinary Services fully participate in what is being done about animal health internationally.

The Mediterranean basin, the 'centre of the world', is an incomparably diverse region from most standpoints, including the distribution of animal diseases. Some important diseases -brucellosis of small ruminants, rabies, echinococcosis/hydatidosis, for example- are present almost everywhere in the region. Others by reason of geography and prevention/control measures are local in their occurrence.

The region is, however, a dynamic cross-roads of three continents, each with its own partially controlled transmissible diseases. Recent history relates epidemics of almost all but the strictly tropical animal diseases either invading or severely threatening the region. Countries around the Mediterranean belong to three of five of the world's OIE Regional Commissions which address matters of regional importance to their Veterinary Services. Recommendations made by Regional Commissions are scrutinized by the International Committee before being accepted by the OIE. Nowhere in the world is this coordination as important or as complicated as it is in the Mediterranean region.

With both a regional and global approach, the OIE, in cooperation with other international organizations, works to fully and transparently participate in facilitating trade while protecting animal and human health.