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From: Presidency
To: Council

Subject: Presidency priority in the veterinary and phytosanitary sectors –
emergency preparedness for plant and animal health
- Information from the Presidency

Delegations will find in Annex an information note from the Presidency on the above mentioned subject to be dealt with under "Any other business" at the meeting of the Council ("Agriculture and Fisheries") on 12 June 2017.

Presidency Priority in the Phytosanitary and Veterinary Sectors
– Emergency Preparedness for Plant and Animal Health

Introduction

The EU has faced different crisis and emergency situations due to incursions of animal diseases and outbreaks of plant pests into its territory such as highly pathogenic avian influenza, *Xylella fastidiosa*, African swine fever, *Phytophthora ramorum*, lumpy skin disease and pine wood nematode.

In view of the epidemiological situation in neighbouring third countries, the risk connected to the growing trade of commodities and extreme climatic conditions, the occurrence or reoccurrence of outbreaks is expected to remain a high threat. Pest and disease outbreaks cause major economic, social and/or environmental impacts unless proper measures are implemented to prevent their occurrence and limit their scale and spread when introduced.

Presidency priority of emergency preparedness in the veterinary and phytosanitary field

In light of the above, the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union has focused on the horizontal priority of emergency preparedness for both the veterinary and phytosanitary sectors. The new EU legislative frameworks for animal and plant health, as well as for official controls, also justify the need for a deeper reflection on this topic, especially on contingency plans and stakeholder awareness.

The Maltese Presidency provided an opportunity to exchange experiences and improve implementation of these tools with a view to supporting Europe's shift towards greater resilience in these sectors by promoting emergency planning within Europe and with its neighbouring regions.

Emergency preparedness in animal health

In the animal health sector, incursions of highly contagious transboundary animal diseases have an immediate impact on food production, trade patterns for the susceptible animals and their commodities and the economic sustainability of sectors reliant on these goods. These incursions are known to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of communities and animal welfare. To effectively prevent, control and eradicate these incursions, competent authorities ought to regularly review the overall emergency preparedness of their veterinary systems.

To improve emergency preparedness it is important to invest during ‘peace time’, especially in early warning systems and contingency plans. The European Union has emphasised the importance of contingency plans under the new Animal Health Law (Regulation (EU) No 2016/429), noting that they are a ‘crucial tool for the successful control of disease emergencies’.

The Maltese Presidency considered that by exploring the priority need to improve Member States' emergency preparedness and identify the possible actions to address such a need, the EU's preparedness against transboundary animal diseases will be improved.

Presidency programme for animal health

The Maltese Presidency presented its priority programme on emergency preparedness for transboundary animal diseases at the Working Party of Chief Veterinary Officers in January 2017.

To capture all the aspects of emergency preparedness, as well as the specific needs regarding contingency planning, the programme was structured to comprehensively cover different elements of emergency preparedness. A detailed questionnaire was circulated to investigate Member States' needs and opportunities for improvement and results were presented and discussed at several meetings of the Working Party of Chief Veterinary Officers. On contingency planning, a prioritisation survey (pair-wise ranking exercise) was proposed to identify priority areas to improve contingency planning and operational procedures in case of outbreaks.

The involvement of stakeholders is one of the most critical and essential elements in any emergency scenario. The Maltese Presidency therefore sought the involvement of stakeholders in these discussions by organising an event together with the '*Fédération Européenne pour la Santé Animale et la Sécurité Sanitaire*' (FESASS) in the margins of the meeting of the Working Party of Chief Veterinary Officers in May 2017.

With regard to third countries, the Maltese Presidency and the European Commission will be hosting a TAIEX workshop in June in Malta for EU Member States and third countries from the Mediterranean region, to promote ways of improving the control measures for transboundary animal diseases in place in the Southern Neighbourhood.

Priority areas for improvements and the next steps

Based on the outcome of the Presidency questionnaire and the subsequent discussions, the primary needs for improving the preparedness of Member States were identified. These were generally found to be consistent between Member States from different regions and could thus be considered as 'common needs for improvements'.

The Chief Veterinary Officers identified the areas where resources should be prioritised to deliver improvements in emergency preparedness. The area most strongly prioritised was that of 'Early warning systems' that ensure the prompt notification of suspected cases of highly contagious animal diseases. Other areas were also prioritised, such as 'Risk assessment', 'Awareness among stakeholders', 'Contingency plans and operational manuals' and 'Training'.

On 'Contingency plans' and 'Operational procedures', five priority areas were identified for improving Member States' rapid and effective response in case of transboundary animal disease incursion, namely control measures in control zones, outbreak investigation, availability of emergency vaccination, epidemiological analysis and culling.

At the last meeting of the Chief Veterinary Officers on 21-23 June in Malta, common needs and priority areas for improvement, as well as opportunities and possibilities for improving preparedness, will be considered to develop recommendations and an action plan.

Emergency preparedness in the field of plant health

In the plant health sector, crises and emergencies resulting from plant pests are linked to the lack of a common understanding of 'plant health' among different levels of stakeholders. This has led to the loss of precious time during outbreaks. Numerous challenges are encountered due to the lack of understanding by stakeholders when competent authorities try to carry out control measures, enforcement measures and other phytosanitary measures. The Maltese Presidency believes that it is necessary for the EU to invest further in plant health awareness-raising, since it is considered as an essential tool in contingency planning, facilitating enforcement, effective control measures and rapid intervention in the eradication and control of pests and diseases.

The European Union has acknowledged the need to raise awareness on plant health through the recent adoption of the new Plant Health Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 2016/2031). In addition, the International Year of Plant Health in 2020 (IYPH 2020) also aims to raise public awareness on the importance of plant health in addressing issues of global concern, including hunger, poverty and threats to the environment.

In preparation for the IYPH 2020, EU Member States could ideally coordinate a communication strategy that delivers clear, consistent and appealing messages and information on plant health. The Maltese Presidency therefore considered that it would be important to focus on exploring possible future cooperation in the development of a common EU strategy for plant health awareness-raising.

Presidency programme for plant health

The Maltese Presidency presented the priority of plant health awareness-raising as an essential tool in contingency planning at the meeting of the Working Party of Chief Plant Health Officers (COPHS) in February 2017. To introduce the topic and to initiate a discussion on this priority, the Presidency developed and carried out a vox pop survey highlighting the lack of understanding of plant health amongst the general public and presented it as a video to the COPHS. This instigated a vibrant debate which led to full support for the Presidency priority.

Further to the support the Presidency priority received at the COPHS meeting, the Presidency conducted a questionnaire amongst all the EU Member States to establish the state of play of plant health awareness within the EU. The outcome of the questionnaire was presented and an exchange of views was held during a workshop held in the margins of the informal meeting of the Chief Plant Health Officers organised in Malta in May 2017.

Priority areas for improvement in the plant health sector

The questionnaire circulated among the COPHS identified the most effective channels to reach stakeholders and highlighted several difficulties related to the implementation of awareness-raising campaigns, such as the lack of human and financial resources.

This led to a common understanding that an EU-wide communication strategy would facilitate the approach of the Member States for a more effective awareness campaign and would pave the way for the preparation for the IYPH 2020. A draft EU awareness-raising strategy for plant health was prepared outlining five priority actions:

1. Development of awareness-raising strategies;
2. Creation of a Commission working group of Member State experts;
3. Creation of toolkit and awareness-raising materials;
4. Engagement with target groups and training of communicators;
5. Monitoring and evaluation.

The COPHS Working Party of 14-15 June will be invited to agree on the establishment of the awareness-raising strategy for plant health.

The Maltese Presidency priority for plant health will therefore lead to a common EU effort in sending out a strong and clear message to the stakeholders and the general public on the importance of awareness-raising and its consequences in the plant health sector.