

## **Outcome of the meeting/Conclusions**

### **Enhancing flu preparedness in the EU in the context of One Health**

This meeting brought together members of the Health Security Committee, Chief Medical and Chief Veterinary Officers, EU agencies - ECDC, EFSA, EMA – and international organisations – the World Health Organisation (WHO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) – to address EU's enhanced preparedness for the next epidemic waves of animal and human influenza focusing on intersectoral cooperation.

In the globalised world, infectious diseases spread quickly, and have huge impact on human and animal health as well as on our economies and societies at large.

A lack of preparedness and delays in response can cost lives, impact global security and damage economies, as recent outbreaks of infectious diseases such as flu, Ebola, Zika, or measles have shown.

The EU often faces the situation that a country alone cannot contain such outbreaks. In addition, a coordinated One-Health approach is required, as disease transmitted among humans or emerging from the human-animal-ecosystem interface pose risks to public health, animal health and global health.

This meeting provided an opportunity to discuss the current worrying epidemiological situation for influenza in humans and animals in the EU, preparedness and response, including surveillance, risk assessment, vaccination and aspects of risk and crisis communication.

Health security and the capacity to deal with crisis situations in food safety or pandemics are a high priority for the European Commission. These elements contribute to a strong, resilient and secure Union.

Preparing and responding to these threats is an area where the EU clearly adds value in working together to protect the health of European citizens.

The Commission is working with Member States, EU agencies, and international partners to achieve this goal.

A pandemic is a complex event, and informed decisions on risk management can only be made on the basis of the best available information at the time.

Uncertainty can be minimized by ensuring that we have efficient mechanisms and capacities in place to react at EU and global level without unnecessary delay.

Legal frameworks and mechanisms in the human and animal health and in the area of medicines provide a solid structure for alerts, surveillance, risk assessment and coordination of measures.

It should be emphasised the importance of getting advantage of surveillance in both sides animals, considering wild birds and poultry, and humans.

It is important, however, to make strategic investments in preparedness and response planning, all within resilient health systems able to monitor, assess, prevent and control outbreaks at national and EU levels before it becomes a deadly pandemic.

Efforts to step up preparedness should aim to strengthen the implementation of the WHO International Health Regulations across Europe, in collaboration with international organisations and partners.

Following the global threats of avian influenza such as H5N1, H7N9, and the SARS outbreak, Member States invested considerably in pandemic preparedness.

The 2009 H1N1 pandemic, the first since 1968, tested national plans, and in the aftermath, many countries and international organizations have evaluated their preparedness and response activities, some of them revising their pandemic preparedness plans.

At the EU level a strengthened EU health security framework was established in 2013, by the EU Decision on serious cross-border threats to health to improve preparedness and strengthen surveillance, monitoring, and the capacity to coordinate response to health emergencies across the EU.

Some key structures and elements under this framework include:

- Coordination of the preparedness and response planning of the Member States;
- The EU voluntary mechanism of joint procurement;
- A solid network of epidemiologic surveillance; with sufficient laboratory capacity
- The Early Warning and Response System for notifying alerts on health threats. This system is currently being re-engineered and linked up with other relevant alert systems, including for animal health.
- Rapid information exchange, consultation, and coordination in the Health Security Committee, as well as through the Animal Disease Notification System, the network of Chief Veterinary Officers of all Member States and their relevant representatives in the Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed;
- Recognition of a situation of public health emergency, and a simplified fast-track procedure for granting marketing authorisation for pandemic influenza vaccines.

The Commission is also working with Member States to strengthen capacities in developing countermeasures to health threats, in particular vaccines, antivirals and then making them available.

Vaccination is a public health priority in Europe, and an area where there is real added value to work together within the European Union. Cooperation at EU level to increase the interoperability and interaction of immunisation information systems or to strengthen vaccine supply and stock management will improve surveillance and vaccine procurement, contributing to better preparedness.

In the EU seasonal flu vaccination already prevents each year an average of 1.6 – 2.2 million cases, 45,000 – 66,000 hospitalisations, 25,000 – 37,000 influenza-related deaths, and € 153 - € 219 million in healthcare costs (general practitioners visits & hospitalisation).

Seasonal influenza vaccination is recommended for approximately 180 million Europeans (based on the WHO definition); however, only 44 % of them (80 millions) actually receive an annual immunisation.

Full implementation of the 75 % target coverage rate set out in the Council Recommendations on seasonal influenza vaccination (2009) in the recommended target groups could immediately reduce the burden of seasonal influenza infections enormously.

There are different ways of promoting vaccination in the animal and human health sectors and there both sides can benefit from sharing best practices

The Commission is already working on better preparedness for influenza and other vaccine preventable diseases through various means, such as: joint procurements for pandemic influenza vaccines; specific projects; and a forthcoming Joint Action on vaccination financed under the EU Health Programme to which 24 countries (among them 20 Member States) have subscribed.

However, preparedness for pandemics refers not only to health, but also to non-health interventions, capabilities, and capacities at community, country, regional and global levels. Investing in preparedness has important benefits for the broader health system and its resilience.

It should not be forgotten that preparing for an influenza pandemic in Member States, is a continuous process of planning, exercising revising and translating into national and subnational pandemic preparedness and response plans.

Elements of these plans must include risk assessment, coordination, risk communication, medical countermeasures, preparedness of health care and other essential services, as well as business continuity. Intersectoral arrangements and plans in place between the health and veterinary sectors is a key prerequisite for preparedness.

This high level meeting of health and veterinary stakeholders and the professional expertise of EU agencies and international organisations is another cornerstone to bring us closer to our common goal to secure health in Europe and prepare for a flu pandemic.

It is essential to ensure the timely sharing information and isolates and other reference materials avoiding working in silos. For that it is also important being aware of the different mechanisms and platforms for sharing data.

The Commission stands ready to support Member States with all available instruments to prevent loss of life by improving the response to influenza with serious cross-border potential in Europe.

The Commission is working on to bring forward a more comprehensive EU preparedness and response agenda, including research and innovation, taking a One Health approach, and reinforcing the EU's role as a global partner for health security.

The role of EU agencies, including the ECDC, EMA and EFSA in preparedness planning and reinforcement should be strengthened, making the most of their technical capacity.

International partners as the OIE, WHO and FAO have a key role to play in response coordination at international level, and Europe is part of that international system.

Finally, the Commission would like to stress the importance of good communication building robust communications processes and establishing joint systems to handle a pandemic influenza event, ensuring that the network and processes are operational before we need them.