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Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures

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ANALYSIS OF THE SANITARY REGULATIONS FOR THE IMPORTATION OF BRAZILIAN MEAT INTO THE UNITED STATES

COMMUNICATION FROM NICARAGUA

The following communication, dated 3 April 2014, is being circulated at the request of the delegation of Nicaragua.

1. In its animal health management system, the United States has placed great emphasis on maintaining biosecurity through prevention. One means of fulfilling this precept is by keeping out any possible risk of acquiring foot and mouth disease (FMD) by prohibiting imports of bovine animals and meat products from countries where FMD exists.
2. On this basis, United States policy has been to permit imports of bovine meat only from countries listed by the OIE as FMD free **without** use of vaccination, or from countries declared to be **wholly** (at national level) FMD free **with** vaccination. There is only one country in the world in this category, namely Uruguay, from which fresh or frozen bovine meat can be imported to the United States.
3. In Brazil, the OIE recognizes only the state of Santa Catarina as being FMD free **without** vaccination. There are also five separate zones declared by the OIE as being free of the disease **with** vaccination. It is a fact that all the northern zone of Brazil is not FMD free, as may be seen from the OIE map for 2013 (official status of FMD in South America).
4. The disease does not follow borders nor does it respect them, especially when it exists inside a country's borders as in the case of Brazil, which also has borders with other South American countries where FMD is prevalent.
5. Brazil has an FMD containment zone in the north of the country, but this is not a sufficient guarantee that the disease will not spread to neighbouring states from which the proposed regulations permit fresh/frozen meat to be imported from Brazil.
6. It is common knowledge that FMD is caused by a highly contagious virus that can be transmitted via inanimate objects and may also be spread by wind.
7. The various simulation exercises carried out in the United States have shown that it is essential to have an excellent capacity to track infected animals within 48 hours of an outbreak in order to be able to rapidly eliminate and contain the incipient onset of the disease.
8. The experience and results of simulation exercises for FMD outbreaks show the importance of identification and isolation of potentially infected animals, which requires a comprehensive and excellent system of bovine traceability. A comprehensive traceability programme is a *sine qua non* condition to be able to respond rapidly to animal health emergencies, as occurred in the eradication programmes for tuberculosis and brucellosis, especially if zones where FMD is prevalent still exist in the meat-exporting country.

9. Thus, it is only possible to respond effectively to an FMD outbreak when one knows which animals are affected, where they are located, with what other animals they have been in contact, where these animals are located, and whether they in turn have had contact with other animals that may potentially spread the disease.

10. In Brazil the Bovine Traceability Programme is voluntary. It applies only to livestock whose meat is destined for countries that require traceability of the animal from birth (European Union, for example). Other countries have similar systems. However, it should be borne in mind that only some areas in Brazil are considered FMD free **with** vaccination, and therefore the absence of a generalized traceability system could affect the monitoring, detection and response capability in the face of FMD emergent events.

11. For many years Nicaragua has been working hand in hand with the United States sanitary authorities in joint programmes aimed at preventing the entry of FMD into Central America.

12. Efforts have been devoted to campaigns for prevention, training and market restriction through controls on the entry of animal products and byproducts that could represent a risk for the sanitary status of Central America. These restrictions have applied not only to countries of South America but also to the rest of the world considered not FMD free.

13. Nicaragua has forgone importing semen from Brazil for genetic improvement, in order to remain consistent with these control programmes carried out together with the United States.

14. The damage caused by FMD has led nearly all developed countries to adopt measures firstly to eradicate it and subsequently to remain free of it over time through prevention programmes.

15. This has led to the creation of two major groupings of countries with exportable production surpluses: the so-called "FMD free circuits" (United States, Australia, New Zealand, Central America etc.), and those that are not FMD free, known as the "FMD circuits".

16. The FMD virus has enormous variation potential, and eradicating it through the use of natural or synthetic vaccines seems difficult since none of the genomic regions of the virus is invariant.

COVERAGE OF VACCINATION PROGRAMMES

17. Concerns of a technical nature are based on considerations about the lack of confidence on the part of the countries using vaccination as regards circulation of the virus. Those countries are not sufficiently confident that their own vaccination coverage is stopping the virus from circulating; since they have not obtained the evidence to be sure that the virus is not circulating, their campaigns remain active in most of their national territory, as in the case of Brazil.

18. In view of the above, the containment of FMD **with vaccination** cannot be a sufficient guarantee for the United States of America, *inter alia* due to:

- (a) The rapid mutation of the virus, especially when the country in question still has zones where the virus is prevalent;
- (b) Differences in susceptibility of organisms, as not all animal organisms react in the same way;
- (c) There are different vaccines and fragility in the manufacture of vaccines and serotypes;
- (d) The immunological protection provided by vaccination remains scientifically moot.

19. Many simulations of FMD outbreaks have been made in the United States, such as the one in March 2005, and the total value of losses under various scenarios have been calculated, ranging from a small outbreak, successfully contained within one state, to a major multi-state outbreak, resulting in the loss of up to 30% of the national cattle herd. The value of losses from these simulations have ranged from between US\$37 billion (0.15% of 2006 GDP) to US\$228 billion (0.92% of 2006 GDP), the greatest impact coming from the wholesale destruction of animals and the economic impact in curbing livestock supply.

20. Given the large-scale movement of bovine animals and products among NAFTA countries, the risk of the impact of an outbreak must be minimized. After all the efforts made to keep FMD outside the borders of the United States and NAFTA countries, there is no room for complacency.

21. FMD has a devastating impact on the economy of affected countries. The process of containing the disease requires major resources in vaccination and monitoring as well as trade restrictions, and historically the destruction of millions of animals. In Great Britain the 2001 epidemic led to the slaughter of 7 million animals and had an estimated economic impact of between US\$12-18.5 billion from direct and indirect losses.

22. The importation of fresh and frozen meat creates a serious risk for the herds of the United States, Canada, Mexico and Central America.

23. Like the other Central American countries, Nicaragua is not economically prepared to cope with the catastrophe that an outbreak of FMD would represent in the country, since its bovine livestock sector and industries are its main economic pillar.

24. Given the high economic risk that modifying the current regulations represents, has the United States given thought to the amounts of compensation for livestock farmers of the United States and other countries affected by the change in the regulations in order to allow imports of meat from Brazil?

ANTIGENIC VARIATION

25. The variation of the FMD virus is a serious obstacle for control and eradication campaigns, and the capacity for antigenic variation of the FMD virus seems far from exhausted.

26. There is a latent biological risk from the inherent variation capacity of antigenic properties of the FMD virus, which is precisely why it has not been possible to eradicate the disease from large parts of the affected countries. It is a virus with a heterogeneous structure whose evolution is unpredictable.

27. The dynamic, constantly evolving world of riboviruses and in particular the FMD virus contrasts with the new vaccine design technologies whose criteria are those of a static world: they are constructions obtained from fixed sequences by molecular cloning or chemical synthesis, which instead are unwittingly promoting the accelerated selection of new variants of the virus.

28. Little is known about the control procedures for the antigenic variants of the FMD virus circulating in the immediate surroundings, including neighbouring regions, in order to validate the probable immunoprotection conferred by specific vaccines.

PRESENCE IN MEAT PRODUCTS

29. More specific guidelines should be given concerning risk abatement measures required in slaughterhouses so as to be able to visualize the minimization of virus survival during slaughter and the preparation of boned meat, where risk elimination is very difficult.

30. Furthermore, as regards the presence of the virus in animal products, focusing on inactivation treatments, there is a clear absence of an established threshold of viral contamination below which a product may be considered safe.

31. The data obtained so far on meat trade safety do not guarantee that the risk assessment of survival of the virus using the currently recommended procedures can establish an insignificant risk of contagion.

32. Again, there is a lack of data on survival of the virus in boned bovine meat from carcasses where the acidification process has not been carried out properly for the skeletal muscles. Information is also lacking on survival of the virus in fatty tissue, apart from bone marrow and infected blood splashed on carcass surfaces.

33. Therefore, on sanitary grounds, **Nicaragua considers that the importation of bovine meat products from countries that are FMD free with vaccination into countries that are FMD free without vaccination represents a high sanitary risk for the livestock assets of the importing country and of its neighbours and the region(s) having a similar sanitary status (FMD free without vaccination).**

34. Thus:

- (a) Circulation of the virus in susceptible wild mammals represents a high risk for a zone that is FMD free without vaccination.
- (b) The review of the historical data for zones recognized as FMD free with vaccination in some countries shows that they have been very unstable.
- (c) The immunological protection provided by strains of attenuated virus vaccines remains a matter of scientific debate.
- (d) The systems of bovine traceability in many countries that are FMD free with vaccination have not proved sufficiently strong to guarantee that the disease will not spread.

35. Nicaragua is seriously concerned by the APHIS proposal to amend the relevant United States regulations on FMD in order to allow imports of fresh and/or frozen bovine meat into the United States from 14 of the 17 states of Brazil, or zones of those states included in the above-mentioned five zones that are FMD free with vaccination.

NB: Countries that place these agricultural assets at risk should provide compensation.
