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A One Health approach addresses wildlife, ecosystem and human health issues

UN organizations launch Scientific Task Force on Wildlife Diseases

Bonn/Rome, 8 July 2011 - Emerging infectious diseases are appearing worldwide and pose an increasing threat to wildlife, livestock and people. They consist mainly of viruses and bacteria that have increased their capacity to trigger disease, allowing them to appear in new hosts in different parts of the world.

Changing ecological, agricultural, and climatic conditions have the potential to increase health risks to wildlife, livestock and people through the infectiousness of germs, which cross into new species.

In order to combat this increasing threat, the United Nations Environment Programme Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (UNEP/CMS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) - Animal Health Service have convened a Scientific Task Force on Wildlife Diseases to seek an integrated approach to manage the health of ecosystems, wildlife, livestock and people within a 'One Health' framework.

At the meeting in Beijing, China, which took place at the end of June, UN agencies, professional associations, research organizations, including the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology, and governmental bodies from the United States, Australia and Mongolia agreed to enhance research on diseases that have an impact on both domestic and migratory wildlife, and that are of greatest concern with regard to food security, sustainable livelihoods and conservation.

The 'One Health' approach is a framework to address the wildlife/livestock/human disease interface, integrating different disciplines and involving United Nations agencies, governments, conservationists, health professionals and professional associations.

Epidemics and pandemics affecting domestic livestock, migratory animals and people occur increasingly frequently, which makes it necessary to place diseases in the broader context of development, food security, natural resource management and ecosystem services to achieve wildlife and ecosystem health.

The understanding of migration ecology is therefore key to prevent and address the spread of disease and to provide early warning systems. Some migratory species can be excellent indicators in this respect.

The emergence of H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people, caused millions of dollars of damage to trade and local livelihoods, led to the deaths of hundreds of millions of domestic poultry, while at the same time killed tens of thousands of wild birds, including 6,000 wild waterbirds during a major outbreak at Qinghai Lake in China in April-July 2005.

The influenza pandemic of 2009, commonly known as 'swine flu', consisted of virus strains from people, pigs and birds that threatened both animals and humans. Spreading rapidly and affecting global economies, it required emergency planning with a coordinated and collaborative international response.

In May 2010 the critically endangered Saiga antelope suffered mass mortalities of 12,000 animals due to the infectious disease pasteurellosis. It shows how important it is to have in place emergency mechanisms to provide an adequate response.

Another example occurred in October 2010, when Mongolian gazelles were infected with foot-and-mouth disease with outbreaks in both livestock and wildlife in Mongolia. In addition this outbreak had significant effects on livelihoods and trade.

Migratory species can act as natural reservoirs for disease and help spread the pathogens during their seasonal movements. At the same time they can be victims of disease due to their close proximity and interactions with livestock and people. The Scientific Task Force on Wildlife Diseases is modeled after the Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds established in 2005, which was highly successful in providing a voice for the wildlife with technical papers and recommendations on how to cope with avian influenza.

The Scientific Task Force on Wildlife Diseases will work on identifying diseases that have an impact on both domestic and migratory wildlife with major implications for food security, sustainable livelihoods and conservation; and finding ways to bridge the gaps between wildlife managers and health practitioners. The Task Force's 'One Health' approach will promote information sharing among government sectors, wildlife managers, NGOs and relevant United Nations agencies such as UNEP, FAO, the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

A mechanism will be created for CMS and FAO member states to respond to the threat of transboundary animal health crises by reporting wildlife morbidity and mortality events.

The outputs of this workshop and results of priority action will be summarized in a report to be presented at the next CMS Conference of the Parties to be held 20-25 November 2011 in Bergen, Norway.

Notes to editors:

CMS

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (UNEP/CMS) works for the conservation of a wide array of endangered migratory animals worldwide through the negotiation and implementation of agreements and action plans. CMS is a growing convention with special importance due to its expertise in the field of migratory species. At present, 116 countries are parties to the Convention.

www.cms.int

FAO-EMPRES

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations works internationally to combat hunger and serve as an information resource. The Emergency Prevention System (EMPRES) was created by FAO to prevent disease spread and ensure greater livestock health at a global level. The Wildlife Health and Ecology Unit was created to investigate the role of wildlife in the spread of diseases affecting livestock and agricultural livelihoods. The group serves the international community through publications, workshops, training events, and many other projects.

www.fao.org

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Related links:

FAO Animal Production and Health Division (www.fao.org/ag/aga.html)

FAO Emergency Prevention System

<http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/programmes/en/empres.html>