European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/153
Foot-and-mouth disease

Brussels, 14 May 2003

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee

on the

Proposal for a Council Directive on Community measures for the control of foot-and-mouth disease and amending Directive 92/46/EEC

COM(2002) 736 final - 2002/0299 (CNS)

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On 7 February 2003 the Council, in accordance with Article 37(3) of the Treaty establishing the European Community, decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee on the

Proposal for a Council Directive on Community measures for the control of foot-and-mouth disease and amending Directive 92/46/EEC
COM (2002) 736 final – 2002/0299 (CNS).

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the matter, adopted its opinion on 1 April 2003 (rapporteur: **Mr Bastian**).

At its 399th plenary session of 14 and 15 May 2003 (meeting of 14 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted this opinion by 100 votes to none, with four abstentions.

1. Gist of the Commission document

1.1 The European Union has been affected in recent years by severe epidemics the consequences of which have traumatised farmers and EU citizens. The memory of the foot-and-mouth (FMD) epidemic which in 2001 decimated herds in certain Member States is still present. In the interests of prevention, the European Commission is proposing a new Community framework for controlling FMD.

1.2 The European Commission proposal, which has been in preparation since 1998 and has become more necessary than ever after the crisis of 2001, is presented as a bulwark against the propagation of a new epidemic. The European Commission and all the players in the stock-farming sector are aware that there is no simple solution for controlling FMD, as the subject is so complex. In addition, the "solidity" of the proposed bulwark will depend on the investment of all the parties in the proposed machinery.

1.3 The Commission does not call into question the current policy, which gives priority to the slaughter of animals infected and contaminated by the virus, but gives emergency vaccination a more important role in the eradication machinery in the event of a new epidemic.

1.4 The European Commission wishes to promote rapid action in the event of a new FMD outbreak and immediate and effective control measures.

1.5 Measures to enable rapid and detailed diagnosis of the virus are proposed. Moreover, a Community reference laboratory would be responsible for coordination between the various national laboratories.

1.6 Prevention of the propagation of the disease would be based on increased monitoring of animal movements and of the use of products likely to be contaminated, and on the more systematic use of emergency vaccination.

1.7 A key element of the proposed new machinery is the application of the principle of regionalisation, based on strict control measures in certain EU regions without compromising the EU's general interests.

1.8 Controlling FMD would be made easier through rapid access to antigen banks. Moreover, aid would be provided for adjacent third countries infected by or at risk from the FMD virus, in particular as regards the emergency supply of antigens or vaccines.

1.9 The proposed new Community framework for controlling FMD includes highly detailed national contingency plans. These will be reviewed regularly in the light of real-time alert exercises carried out in the Member States.

1.9.1 These contingency plans will include rules on the use of emergency vaccination and will have to take account of environmental considerations in the event of an outbreak. They should provide for close cooperation between the competent veterinary and environmental authorities.

1.9.2 The Commission will be able to modify and adapt certain technical aspects of the control measures by the procedure of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health.

2. General comments

2.1 The EESC considers it imperative to set up a new Community framework to control FMD. In its opinion on the Proposal for a Council Decision amending Decision 91/666/EEC establishing Community reserves of foot-and-mouth disease vaccines[1] the EESC stressed that protecting the health of European livestock was of the greatest importance and that there was an obvious need to establish a new legal framework as suggested by the Commission, which would enable more effective and immediate measures to be taken to control foot-and-mouth diseases.

2.2 In its opinions the EESC has always called for citizens to be given clear and objective information in crisis situations. It is essential to realise that FMD is an animal disease that poses no risks to human health. Any information must avoid creating confusion on this point.

2.3 In view of this situation, steps should be taken to encourage a sustainable stock-breeding sector, taking into account the demands of EU citizens as regards animal welfare, trends in agricultural production and trade and the need to maintain the proper functioning of the single market. A sustainable stock-breeding sector is based on an animal health policy incorporating the latest scientific findings available and new technologies.

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1 CES 936/99, OJ No. C 368 of 20.12.1999

2.4 Veterinary controls and systems in the EU should be reviewed and tightened up. The 2001 FMD epidemic has highlighted this need.

2.4.1 The 2001 epidemic of Pan-Asian O strain FMD spread with unprecedented speed in the EU. The causes of this epidemic have not been established for certain but everything suggests that the illegal introduction of products that were used in animal feed lies at the heart of the matter.

2.4.2 Before it had been identified and controls had been introduced, the FMD virus spread in the United Kingdom, then in France, the Netherlands, Ireland and Northern Ireland. The consequences of this epidemic and the steps taken to control it had an impact on the economy of the regions affected. Heavy losses were sustained by farms, the food production industry, both upstream and downstream, tourism and other sectors.

2.4.3 Since 1992, the EU has applied the principle of banning prophylactic vaccination against FMD, which was practised in some Member States, and encouraging a policy of "non-vaccination". The EU takes account of the trade recommendations made by the International Office of Epizootics (OIE). These recommendations envisaged very long periods of time for a country to regain the status of "free from foot-and-mouth disease" after recourse to emergency vaccination (protective vaccination) in the event of an FMD outbreak. When the crisis broke, these recommendations did not take account of the state of scientific knowledge regarding trial methods enabling a distinction to be drawn between vaccinated and infected animals. In May 2002, the OIE's international animal health code was reviewed. A country that had carried out emergency vaccination in conjunction with the elimination through slaughter of infected herds and a post-vaccination serological check on vaccinated animals by means of tests to detect antibodies reacting with non-structural proteins could regain "free from disease/infection" status for FMD six months after the appearance of the last outbreak or after the end of the vaccination campaign if this was sooner.

2.4.4 Up to now, EU policy on controlling FMD has been based on slaughtering infected herds and animals of species sensitive to FMD that could have been in contact with the area of infection or with vectors of infection or which could have been infected in some other way. Emergency vaccination was a last resort.

2.5 After the traumatic experiences in the regions affected by the FMD epidemic, it is essential to take account also of the social, environmental and psychological consequences of the methods used to control FMD and of their effects on the overall economy of these regions.

2.5.1 It is vital to encourage methods that reduce the direct or indirect impact of the policy of systematic slaughter on public opinion, stock-breeding and other economic sectors.

2.5.2 Any policy to control FMD must avoid the mass destruction of healthy animals. Moreover, steps should be taken to limit damage to trade in non-affected areas at national, European and international level.

3. Specific comments

3.1 Disease prevention

3.1.1 The EESC agrees with the Commission that preventive measures are necessary to avoid propagation of the FMD virus and its incursion on to EU territory and into EU livestock from adjacent third countries or through imports of live animals or products of animal origin. The main risk of introducing FMD comes from illegal imports of animals and animal products from countries where FMD is endemic. The EESC supports the recent Commission proposals aimed at tightening up the rules on personal imports of meat and milk products into the EU, which will come into effect on 1 January 2003.

3.1.2 Proper, effective inspection systems and border checks are essential. It is essential to develop systems for providing information on FMD outbreaks in other parts of the world and to see that existing rules are applied properly. The EESC is in favour of all OIE member states undertaking to report FMD outbreaks immediately, together with the measures they have taken.

3.1.3 More effective supervision of animal movements within the EU and between farms is required. It must be based on the principles of bio-security, risk assessment and a better animal identification system, especially as regards sheep, goats and pigs.

3.1.4 To prevent epidemics, it is imperative to respect good hygiene practices on farms and when transporting animals.

3.1.5 The EESC stresses the need for instruments to distribute information and for detailed technical training aimed at improving knowledge about epidemics and the methods used to control them. Farmers and vets would take part in these events, which would be organised in collaboration with neighbouring Member States. The Commission's proposals on this matter (Annex XVII) must be beefed up. In addition, steps should be taken to ensure that a high level of veterinary expertise is maintained in rural areas so that an effective animal health policy can be pursued. The EU Commission's proposals, particularly those regarding the CAP and regional policy, should be assessed in the light of this requirement.

3.2 Measures to be taken as soon as an FMD outbreak occurs

3.2.1 The EESC agrees with the Commission that rapid action based on immediate and effective control measures must be taken as soon as an FMD outbreak occurs.

3.2.2 The EESC supports the proposals to introduce measures gradually, in keeping with the size of an outbreak. The EESC is in favour of a regionalisation of Member States' territory to include one or more regulated areas and a disease-free area. The EESC approves the distinction

between temporary control zones, protection zones and surveillance zones. The delimitation of zones is to be based on a thorough epidemiological assessment of the animal health situation.

3.2.3 The measures put forward by the Commission to enable rapid and detailed diagnosis of the virus are warmly welcomed by the EESC. The EESC is in favour of the installation of a Community reference laboratory responsible for coordination between the national laboratories.

3.2.4 The EESC supports the maintenance in the Member States of laboratories and structures providing scientific expertise in the field of FMD diagnosis.

3.2.5 The EESC notes that Community FMD control policy should combine the systematic slaughter of infected and contaminated animals, which is provided for in certain cases for reasons of efficiency, with emergency vaccination.

3.2.6 The EESC is pleased that an increasingly significant place is being given to emergency vaccination in the EU's measures for controlling FMD, with flexibility being allowed in their application at local level. It is important that such decisions are taken in close consultation with all the partners involved along the line. With this in mind, the EESC also calls upon the Commission to encourage, in consultation with the partners of the OIE, a relaxing and harmonisation of the rules on the periods before the recovery of former export status for vaccinated animals. The directives of the OIE on this period must evolve in line with research findings.

3.2.7 The EESC stresses the need for FMD control policy to take into account the values of European citizens as regards ethics and animal welfare.

3.2.8 The EESC agrees that it is necessary to set up transparent and effective procedures to guarantee rapid access to antigens. The setting-up of a Community reference laboratory responsible in particular for informing the Commission and the Member States on needs in the field of vaccines and antigens is a proposal of relevance.

The EESC feels that, when the health of animals in the EU is threatened, it is vital to allow countries bordering the EU rapid and easy access to Community stocks of vaccines and antigens.

3.2.9 The EESC supports the Commission's proposals aimed at preventing the spread of the disease as soon as an outbreak occurs by carefully monitoring movements of animals and the use of products liable to be contaminated. The EESC considers it wise to place restrictions on the semen, ova and embryos of infected animals from susceptible species.

3.2.10 The EESC approves the proposals to apply, if necessary, control measures not only to infected animals of susceptible species, but also to contaminated animals of species not susceptible to the disease, notably poultry, which may be mechanical vectors for the virus.

3.2.11 The EESC approves the Commission's wish to make cleansing and disinfection an integral part of the Community FMD control policy.

3.2.12 The EESC encourages the provision of clear and precise information for European citizens as part of the process of prevention. The EESC is therefore in favour of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Chain being able to decide that a Member State which has been hit by an FMD outbreak can have its former export status restored earlier than allowed at present (namely six months after protective emergency vaccination) if an extensive survey in the protection and surveillance zone(s) shows that the FMD virus is no longer active.

3.2.13 The EESC feels that, in the interests of efficiency, it is wise to empower the Commission to modify and adapt certain technical aspects of the control measures by the procedure of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health.

3.2.14 The EESC is in favour of applying the principle of regionalisation to control measures as proposed by the European Commission if this enables strict controls to be imposed in certain EU regions without jeopardising the general interests of the Community. It should be stressed that the principle of regionalisation must be applied in a spirit of reciprocity by our trading partners in accordance with the veterinary agreements concluded with them by the EU.

3.3 **Contingency plans**

3.3.1 The EESC supports the Commission proposals concerning national contingency plans specifying the national measures required to maintain a high level of FMD awareness and preparedness and feels that the conditions laid down are necessary.

It is imperative to set up systems for providing information on outbreaks and rapid communication between the organisations concerned in an emergency.

3.3.2 The EESC stresses the importance of the measures on the organisation of alert exercises to control outbreaks. Such exercises should be organised at least once a year and include the participation of farmers and vets. The EESC approves the fact that Member States are to be encouraged to organise and carry out these exercises within the framework of cross-border programmes.

3.3.3 The EESC considers that Member States' contingency plans should be reviewed more frequently in the light of real-time alert exercises. Checks should be carried out *in situ* by the EU Commission on the adequacy of national plans, the effectiveness of the arrangements for implementing them, staffing levels and the state of preparation of veterinary services. The Commission's coordinating role should be enhanced by setting up European coordination machinery.

3.3.4 The involvement of the European Commission in the preparation, checking and implementation of contingency plans is seen as a positive element by the EESC.

3.3.5 The EESC considers that the Member States must remain free to take stricter measures as regards applying the directive and welcomes the Commission's proposals on this point. The EESC particularly approves the Member States being allowed to take all the additional national measures which are deemed necessary and proportionate to contain the FMD virus, taking into account the particular epidemiological, animal husbandry, commercial and social conditions prevailing in the affected area.

3.3.6 The question of how to eliminate carcasses must be the subject of detailed provisions. Arrangements should be made for local operational plans that take account of local social, environmental and public health realities.

3.4 **Research and development**

3.4.1 Scientific research, and especially applied research, is a key element in preventing the propagation of outbreaks. It is essential to maintain and develop in the EU Member States a high level of expertise in the field of animal illnesses. European society must be reassured that policy on controlling FMD can evolve at the same speed as scientific and technological advances in developing vaccines and trial methods.

3.4.2 Research should be encouraged and given adequate funding, especially in the field of marker vaccines and serology differentiation tests. The EESC asks the European Commission to send out a strong message along these lines to show its will to promote European research and share the fruits of it with non-EU countries.

3.4.3 The fruits of research must be exchanged, distributed and used on the ground. The achievement of this objective requires efficient communication, distribution and training networks.

4. **Compensation**

4.1 The stock-breeding sector is essential to EU agriculture. It requires major investments and is subject to many different risks. It is therefore necessary, in the event of losses, to improve compensation for European stockbreeders in accordance with uniform criteria throughout the EU, particularly when animals are slaughtered. The losses sustained by farms, including indirect losses resulting from being placed in quarantine, the processing industries, agro-food companies and the whole food production sector both upstream and downstream must be compensated. It is particularly necessary to compensate losses due to the problems of marketing products in areas where animal and product movements are restricted. A Community fund to cover expenditure in the event of serious crises is more necessary than ever.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The EESC supports the approach put forward by the EU Commission to combat the FMD virus and its propagation. The Commission should strive for an optimal approach with proper regard for veterinary, economic (for the whole rural economy), environmental and ethical factors.

5.2 To prevent any new crisis occurring, the EESC asks the EU Commission to give priority to developing applied research in the field of animal health. The bases of any effective prevention policy are a high level of expertise and a dynamic network of European experts. It is also vital to see that new research discoveries in the stock-breeding sector are distributed, used and passed on to others.

5.3 As soon as new scientific advances are available, the Community's measures for controlling FMD should be adapted, especially if they make it possible to avoid slaughtering animals and give preference to vaccination.

Brussels, 14 May 2003.

The President of the European Economic and Social Committee	The Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger Briesch	**Patrick Venturini**