Evaluation of acceptance of alternative FMD eradication strategies in Switzerland

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Foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) continues to be the most important economic threat to the livestock industries throughout the world. The last major outbreaks in Switzerland were recorded in 1965/66, in which more than 1000 farms were affected by FMD virus serotype O. As with other EU countries, Switzerland employed an FMD mass prophylactic vaccination policy until 1990. During this period, approximately 30% of the susceptible livestock population (predominately dairy cattle) was annually vaccinated using a trivalent vaccine. Since 1990, Switzerland no longer applies such a vaccination policy. Instead, an emergency vaccine bank was established, and currently holds approximately 300,000 doses of the four serotypes O, A, SAT-2 and Asia1. Every 5 years the vaccine bank is replaced with a new stock, and if necessary, the serotypes adjusted according to the disease situation.

Already during the height of the 2001 UK epidemic several organizations such as the Swiss farmer’s union, animal welfare activists, and breeders’ organizations asked for an immediate introduction of a “mass prophylactic vaccination”. The two major food retailers did not oppose to this proposal. The main rational for this was to “protect the Swiss breeding stock”. In addition, most likely due to the constant media pressure of the outbreaks within the EU, these outbreaks had hit consumer confidence, at a time when it was already reeling from a string of food scares such as BSE, antibiotics residues in food and others. As in the UK, many consumers in Switzerland were horrified in particular by the mass slaughter of animals, the funeral pyres, and the waste of food and protein, respectively. On the issue of vaccination, it was discussed among animal welfare groups and consumers organizations whether this would have been a suitable option for disease control. At this point however it was unclear whether meat and other products from vaccinated animals would have been equally acceptable to the consumers as products from non-vaccinated animals.

The Swiss Federal Veterinary Office as well as the IVI updated the public regularly on the relevant issues such as the “facts and figures” of the outbreak, the rationale for using the OIE “stamping out” policy, the measurement taken at the boarders etc. The media as well as the internet (the own websites) were used as the way of distribution. In addition, three “FMD crisis” meetings with the cantonal veterinary services were held. At these meetings new measurements within Switzerland (such as import restrictions with EU countries, restriction of cattle auctions etc) were discussed.
After the last FMD case on the UK on September 30, 2001 media attention for the disease became negligible. However, there were still several open questions, and therefore it was decided by the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office in collaboration with the IVI to initiate a “round table” discussion to which (i) consumers organizations, (ii) food retailers, (iii) stakeholders such as livestock keepers, (iv) animal welfare groups (v) animal health organizations, and (vi) the Swiss farmers union were invited. The aims of the meeting was to (i) outline the current approach of FMD eradication, (ii) to illustrate disease control measures such as mass culling and the use of emergency vaccination, and (iii) to get an understanding of how consumers organizations would support the marketing of meat and other products derived from vaccinated animals (protective vaccination) without any restrictions (such as special labeling). The round table took place on April 11, 2002. All invited organizations did attend this meeting.

The following main conclusions from this “round table” can be summarized as follows:

1. Preventive and control measures:
   - “Stamping out” of FMD infected herds is accepted to be the basic tool for eradication
   - Mass prophylactic vaccination is considered (by most organizations) not to be a viable option
   - Emergency “suppressive vaccination” (vaccinated animals are killed within a certain time period) is rejected by all organizations
   - Emergency “protective vaccination” (vaccinated animals are used for consumption) is accepted by all organizations
   - If emergency vaccine is used, there will be an enormous pressure on the farmers outside the designated vaccination zone to vaccinate their animals

2. Marketing of products:
   - Products derived from FMD vaccinated animals should be marketed through regular (although controlled) channels
   - There should not be a trade barrier for vaccinated animals since using newly developed tests vaccinated herds can be distinguished from those infected with FMD virus
   - Consumers should accept products from vaccinated animals

3. Consumers and stakeholder’s knowledge:
   - Consumers and stakeholders show a lack of understanding for many aspects of the disease. The information provided by the various agencies is too complex.

4. Disease awareness:
   - Stakeholders disease awareness is only present at an acceptable level if there is an acute risk of disease introduction.
   - Essential elements of biosecurity are only practiced during the perceived immediate risk of introduction.
• Stakeholders need a better understanding of the importance of recording animal movements.

The general feedback by the participants was found to be positive. The media response to the meeting was mediocre; reports were generally seen in the farmer’s press.

We strongly believe that these discussions with the stakeholders and the public are urgently needed before the upcoming of a “crisis” in order to gain a higher acceptance of disease control measures in case of an outbreak, not only in case of FMD. It was also shown that these outbreaks have had a major impact on society. Therefore, FMD can no longer be seen just as a purely veterinary and/or agricultural issue; socio-economic factors also need to be considered. Improvement in the methods used for prevention, control and eradication of the disease as well as the evaluation of different strategies in terms of effectiveness will be urgently required in the near future.