

REPORT OF LAUNCHING MEETING FOR SUB REGIONAL TCP/RAS/3006 BANGKOK, 28-30 JULY 2004.

This is the report of the Launching Meeting for FAO Project TCP/RAS/3006 - "Diagnostic Laboratory and Surveillance Network Coordination for Control and Prevention of Avian Influenza in Southeast Asia" - that took place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 28-30 July 2004.

The primary objective of TCP/RAS/3006 is to support national efforts aiming at immediate control or elimination of avian influenza A disease in flocks so as to stop transmission of the virus from poultry to humans. Specific immediate objectives of the sub regional coordination assistance are to:-

- Create sub-regional epidemiological surveillance and diagnosis networks with the aim of rapidly detecting, diagnosing and controlling avian influenza A in affected countries and quickly stamping-out incursions should they occur.
- Identify avian influenza A risk factors with the aim of preventing future outbreaks.

The Launching Meeting was honored by an opening address from H.E. Mr. Chaturon Chaisang, Deputy Prime Minister of the Royal Government of Thailand. FAO Regional Office for Asia and The Pacific (FAORAP) provided the venue and co-organized the meeting with FAO Headquarters Rome.

The meeting was attended by several Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) and leading scientists in epidemiology and laboratory diagnosis from countries of the sub-region, in addition to representatives of OIE, WHO and other international organizations. FAO consultants and experts from several countries within and outside the sub-region provided technical support to the meeting. A list of participants and their contact details can be found at Annex 1A.

In addition to formally launching the sub regional network for Southeast Asia, participants at the Launching Meeting were asked to consider and endorse proposed minimum requirements for diagnosis and surveillance of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in the region, as a basis for a formal work programme in accordance with the project objectives. At a meeting held in Bangkok on 21-23 July 2004, a group of FAO Experts developed Draft Guiding Principles setting out proposed minimum requirements for epidemiological analysis and laboratory diagnosis of HPAI. A list of the participants at the Expert Meeting may be found at Annex 1B.

After the welcome and opening presentations, participants at the Launching Meeting discussed the evolution of HPAI in the sub region and the consequent need to modify approaches to surveillance, diagnosis and management, including the use of vaccine, as appropriate. In particular, the continuing cases reported in Viet Nam, Thailand, China and Indonesia indicate that H5N1 HPAI is endemic in some parts of Asia. The use of AI vaccines may become a more significant element in some countries' management of the situation in future.

The focus of this meeting was on regional collaboration and improvement of the quality of regional information. Participants noted the continuing importance of timely reporting to OIE of significant disease events.

On the second day of the Launching Meeting, participants held two parallel workshops (one in epidemiology, one in diagnostic methods), during which they discussed the Expert Group's recommendations, including in-depth consideration of the scientific basis for and implications of the technical requirements for each participating country.

On the final day of the Launching Meeting, the results of the workshops were presented to the plenary session. With refinements recommended by country representatives, the Guiding Principles were unanimously accepted by all participants as an appropriate basis on which to build the sub regional networks. It was generally agreed that the Guiding Principles, if adopted by all participating countries, could be instrumental in achieving the objectives of the project. In addition, participants developed an action plan with a series of priority activities for attention by countries and by FAO for developing the networks in the short, medium and longer term.

At the close of the meeting, participants were officially thanked for their conscientious work by Dr Yukol Limlanthong, Director-General of the Department of Livestock Development, on behalf of the Royal Government of Thailand and by Dr He Changchui, Assistant Director General, FAO Regional Office for Asia and The Pacific, on behalf of FAO.

The agenda of the Launching Meeting is at Annex 2. The finalized text of the report ('Guiding Principles For Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Surveillance and Diagnostic Networks in Asia') is at Annex 3 and copies of speeches and presentations delivered during the Launching Meeting are contained in Annex 4 (provided on the CD distributed to participants only).

Although not directly an outcome of this meeting, it is also relevant to note that participants in the Launching Meeting considered a draft discussion paper prepared at the preceding Expert Group's meeting. FAO is reviewing HPAI control strategies, including the use of vaccination, and will shortly produce recommendations that can be used by governments to help define their strategies for dealing with avian influenza.

**DRAFT RECORD OF LAUNCHING MEETING FOR SUB REGIONAL
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Report on day one.

The official welcoming ceremony was opened by Dr He, ADG FAORAP, representing Mr. Diouf, Director General, FAO, followed by a presentation from Dr Domenech, Chief, Animal Health Services, FAO Rome. Presentations were also made by Dr Fujita, Representative of the World Animal Health Organization (OIE) Asia Region, on behalf of OIE and Dr Miranda, from the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional office, Manilla, on behalf of WHO. The Meeting was then honored by a presentation from H.E. Mr. Chaturon Chaisang, Deputy Prime Minister of the Royal Government of Thailand.

After the official opening ceremony, papers were presented on the need for regional cooperation, by Dr Murray (CVO Australia); OIE activities in the region, by Dr Edwards (former Regional Coordinator, SEAFMD); WHO collaborative projects and studies on HPAI, by Dr Peiris (representing WHO); and the concept and objectives of the Sub-Regional TCP (TCP/RAS/3006) by Dr Domenech.

The plenary session continued in the afternoon with an update on the HPAI situation in the Region, presented by Dr Benigno, followed by a presentation on the outputs of the Expert Meeting (the Guiding Principles on Surveillance and Diagnosis of HPAI), presented by Dr Kahn. In the final session of the day, Dr Kahn presented a discussion paper on vaccination for HPAI, representing the views of the Expert Group and other scientists.

Throughout the day it was agreed, repeatedly, that there is a need to deal with HPAI (as a transboundary animal disease) through a regional networking approach. There should be good collaboration between countries, based on sharing national data that meet minimum standards. There should also be linkages between animal health and public health organizations and networks at the sub-national, national, regional and international level to help prevent human infection with HPAI.

All countries agree on the need to harmonize approaches to surveillance and diagnosis, providing that national circumstances (such as geographical factors, poultry production systems and social/cultural practices) are recognized and measures adapted accordingly.

The meeting accepted the offer of the Royal Government of Thailand to lead/host the Regional Networks for Surveillance and Diagnosis of HPAI.

A discussion paper on vaccination prepared by the preceding week's Expert Meeting, including additional consultation with other specialized experts, was presented to the participants. It was agreed that the recommendations of the FAO/OIE/WHO meetings held in Rome and in Bangkok, in February 2004, are still relevant and applicable and must be given closer attention in light of the evolution of HPAI in the region. The paper

presented to the meeting provided a good basis for discussion and FAO will shortly publish recommendations on control strategies.

Report on Day Two.

On the second day of the meeting, country experts with responsibility for epidemiology and/or laboratory diagnostic programmes met with their counterparts in two specialized working groups, which included, as resource persons, expert scientists and FAO consultants from countries within and outside the sub-region. Within their working groups, country experts considered the draft text entitled ‘Guiding Principles for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Surveillance and Diagnostic Networks in Asia’ (the Guiding Principles). This text was prepared by the Expert Group at its meeting (21–23 July 2004, in Bangkok) to help define and gain acceptance of minimum standards and procedures to be used by laboratories and epidemiology centres engaged in the sub-regional Network.

It was generally agreed that the formation of Networks, based upon a common understanding and use of minimum standards, would improve the quality of data collection and analysis and thereby facilitate information sharing and analysis at the regional level – as required to control transboundary diseases like HPAI.

Participants found that the strengths and weaknesses of the individual countries vary greatly. They agreed that it is in the interests of the sub region as a whole to concentrate efforts, in the short term, to ensuring that all participants attain minimum standards for surveillance and diagnosis (as appropriate to their particular circumstances).

For several countries, there is a need to improve the collection and analysis of basic epidemiologic data, in terms of quality and timeliness, and this should be delivered through a sub regional “train the trainer” programme. Resources should also be provided to enable those trained people to conduct follow-up programmes within their countries. Countries that have not yet established a formal information system for collecting, storing and analyzing epidemiological information will consider adopting FAO’s Transboundary Animal Disease Information System (TAD-info), which will be modified to address specific recommendations from this meeting.

The respective roles and responsibilities of sub-national, national, regional and OIE/FAO reference laboratories were discussed and agreed. The participants recognized that there is considerable variation in technical skills, facilities and institutional structures between countries. There is a need for training in quality assurance and for Proficiency Testing, which could be delivered by an International Reference Laboratory working in collaboration with the National Institute of Animal Health, Department of Livestock Development, Thailand (NIAH). The choice of the OIE Reference Laboratory, AAHL (Geelong, Australia) has been approved. Other priorities include harmonization of diagnostic procedures; facilitating the supply of standardized diagnostic reagents; sharing of information and viruses; and facilitating the use of reference laboratories.

Core training is needed in virus isolation and identification techniques for some countries, while specific training in RT-PCR technique for rapid detection of H5 and type A generic genes is a priority for others. It was agreed that all training courses should emphasize the need to employ safe laboratory practices and meet international requirements for handling and transport of samples.

Report on Day Three

On day three, meeting in plenary session, the Launching Meeting considered and endorsed the findings and recommendations of the specialist working groups. Participants then proceeded to develop a prioritized list of training and development activities that should be undertaken to build the networks and facilitate participation by all countries of the sub region. It was noted that support for the two sub regional networks will require both short-medium term and longer term activities and that this would require implementation of additional projects and the identification of funding supplementary to that provided by TCP/RAS/3006.

All countries agreed that the two key experts attending this workshop will be the contacts for coordination on technical matters concerning the networks. In addition, one of these two key experts would be nominated to coordinate on general issues of the network and the nomination will be provided to the FAO's Regional Coordinator in Bangkok by September 1, 2004.

In endorsing the Royal Government of Thailand's offer to lead both networks, on epidemiology and laboratory diagnosis, participants noted that it will be important to provide technical and other support to facilitate effective operation of the sub regional Lead Groups (Centers). A supporting role for the Australian Animal Health Laboratory (AAHL), Geelong, an OIE Reference Laboratory for avian influenza, was identified in regard to the Laboratory Network work programme. Organizations that could undertake similar supporting functions for the epidemiology network will be identified in further collaboration between FAO, OIE and participating countries.

It was noted that FAO TCP projects are intended and implemented to respond to emergency situations and, as such, represent short term assistance. There are several priority areas for medium to longer term consideration. Participants confirmed the need to support ASEAN in taking leadership of regional strategies and programmes for management and control of HPAI and other transboundary animal diseases (as is already the case for FMD under the SEA-FMD project).

Additional medium to longer term priorities for the region include the establishment of links between the relevant animal health, veterinary public health and livestock production initiatives, strengthening the role of regional laboratories and epidemiology teams in regard to all transboundary animal diseases and strengthening veterinary services. One of the continuing objectives of sub regional, regional and international networks is to maintain advocacy for initiatives of this nature.

In closing the meeting Dr Domenech, Chief, FAO Animal Health Services noted that the Launching Meeting was successful in meeting its objectives, i.e. to produce standards, methods and defined activities for adoption by the two networks in their first year of operation. The meeting's endorsement of the 'Guiding Principles' and elaboration of a work programme was an important step forward and the Guidelines would also be used in launching Sub regional Networks for East Asia and South Asia later this year.

Dr Domenech indicated that there will be continuous activity relevant to the TCP in the next 12 months, including a second co-ordination meeting in about 6 months time. In collaboration with Network countries, other Governments and donors, FAO will also take steps to provide for the work started under the TCP to continue on a permanent basis.

Important next steps include conducting an assessment of the current capabilities of the designated Network Laboratory (NIAH, Bangkok) and identification of what is needed to support NIAH in its future role. It will also be necessary to develop a workplan and budget for the implementation of Quality Assurance and Proficiency Testing within the Laboratory Network. These tasks will be undertaken by AAHL working in collaboration with FAO/OIE and National Laboratory Teams, as appropriate.

It will be necessary to identify an FAO/OIE International Collaborating Centre that will support the Regional Epidemiology Centre and the Epidemiology Network. FAO will consult with OIE and Network Members on this matter shortly.

In the next few months FAO will prepare a concept note defining the activities of the Regional Epidemiology Centre, taking into account the coordination activities of the AI Technical Support Unit (FAO, Bangkok). The type of activities and methods/tools for a Sub regional approach to surveillance of AI (and other transboundary animal diseases) will be defined, incorporating key elements such as data collection, data management, data analysis, disease intelligence (multisectorial and multidisciplinary approaches), disease modelling and prediction.

It is important that Network participants, in collaboration with FAO, continue identifying needs that can be brought to the attention of donor organizations and countries. Throughout the duration of the TCP, Network members and FAO must continuously advocate increased investment from Governments and donors, with the goal of building a permanent, long term programme for the prevention and control of avian influenza and other transboundary animal diseases, as foreshadowed by the GF-TADs initiative.

In his closing comments to the Launching Meeting, Dr Yukol Limlanthong, Director-General of the Department of Livestock Development, Thailand, thanked the participants for their conscientious work and reaffirmed the support of the Royal Government of Thailand for this important project and the goal of eliminating avian influenza. Dr He Changchui, ADG FAO-RAP also thanked participants and congratulated them on the achievements of the Launching Meeting, which officially commences a difficult but essential task, to control avian influenza, with resulting benefit to poultry production and human health. On behalf of FAO, Dr He then declared the meeting officially closed.