

Welcoming address

Jacques Février
European Commission

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank the various Italian authorities involved in the organisation of this Bluetongue Symposium for inviting the European Commission to participate in the opening ceremony. In particular, I wish to congratulate Italy, which presently holds the Presidency of the European Union. Last, but not least, I thank the OIE for co-hosting this important event.

Let us talk about bluetongue. In recent years this disease has become a very important issue in the field of animal health; the serious consequences are of particular concern to the EC, in particular DG SANCO discharged with this particular responsibility. Before the late 1990s Europe had accepted the situation around bluetongue to be epidemic with cyclical outbreaks never lasting long and usually disappearing after the first winter season. Subsequently, however, the disease has appeared, and spread quickly, across a large portion of North Africa and southern Europe including France, Italy, Spain and a number of the Balkan states including Greece.

Indeed, in 1998, bluetongue appeared in regions where it had never been expected to occur; we are clearly facing a totally unique situation as the disease has also progressed beyond the 40th parallel historically considered the northernmost limit to outbreaks. We are also entering a world in which the distribution of the *Culicoides* vectors appears to be also extending northwards spectacularly. In fact we can now consider the disease to be endemic in certain regions of some Mediterranean member states.

All this is the result of global warming, which has inexorable effects on ecosystems and on vector-borne diseases; unfortunately, we remain powerless in the face of climate change and its general impact. So now we can reflect only upon what we should do in regard to this new situation within the borders of the EU and to decide upon the appropriate policies, and the relevant strategies, that we must adopt to protect ourselves against this unusual threat. For example, if we include vaccination as part of our future strategy we will immediately lose our freedom and, also, we will have to suffer certain prejudices.

There is another question: how do we prevent the extension of the disease and, in particular, do we have the right tools to reduce, to an acceptable level, the risks involved in the free movement of livestock? Dr Marabelli was very clear on this aspect and is linked intimately to the problems surrounding the movement of vaccinated animals. These questions, and others, must be considered without forgetting that the decisions taken must impact minimally upon the economy, both in the short and in the long term; furthermore, our decisions must be understood clearly by farmers and must be acceptable to the general public.

At this point we are now entering the risk analysis stage where the responsibilities are defined clearly at each step. The OIE, as the animal health reference body within the WHO, has the pre-eminent role in this process. As stated in the *Code*, the OIE standards are the preferred choice for sanitary measures around import risk assessment and through its recommendations on trade, the *Code* determines and orientates any eradication or control policy that may be implemented by veterinary authorities around the world. Although import risk assessment is important, the problems we now face are far wider and require new tools.

Therefore, over the next four days, the EC hopes that this Symposium will provide the opportunity for all the world experts gathered here to exchange opinions and to discuss the newly available scientific information to enable us to reconsider more rationally the risks surrounding bluetongue. In the process I hope new avenues will be opened to the authorities, specifically those with the responsibility of implementing control and eradication policies. All this must be achieved without forgetting the farmer, the farming industry and many others who are waiting for answers to their questions.

I thus wish you all a fruitful conference.

Thanking you for your attention