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Application in OIE Standards of the Concepts of Zoning and Compartmentalisation

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APPLICATION IN OIE STANDARDS OF THE CONCEPTS OF ZONING AND COMPARTMENTALISATION

Introduction

For OIE purposes, 'zoning' and 'regionalisation' have the same meaning.

The difficulty of establishing and maintaining a disease free status for an entire country, especially for diseases the entry of which is difficult to control at national boundaries, has been acknowledged. For many diseases, OIE Member Countries have traditionally applied the concept of zoning to establish and maintain an animal subpopulation with a different animal health status within national boundaries. Recently, they have also been examining the use of the concept of compartmentalisation to define an animal subpopulation in a different way. Such subpopulations may be separated by natural or artificial geographical barriers, by the application of legal regulations or, in certain animal industries, by the application of appropriate commercial management systems.

While zoning has been used for many years by OIE Member Countries, the OIE's work on compartmentalisation has been underway only for several years, and has not progressed as quickly as expected. OIE Member Countries were reluctant to examine compartmentalisation as an abstract concept or principle, but requested that it be incorporated into several 'example' chapters for their consideration. Unfortunately, the best Terrestrial Animals Health Code (Terrestrial Code) chapters to use as examples (addressing commercial pig and chicken industry practices) represented diseases (for example avian influenza) which presented complex epidemiological problems of their own. The result was that the consideration of compartmentalisation was overshadowed by the disease issues.

The concept of compartmentalisation is also being introduced into the Aquatic Animals Health Code (Aquatic Code).

The benefits of zoning and compartmentalisation may include a contribution to disease control or eradication within Member Countries, and to the safety of international trade:

- Progressive zoning may allow a stepwise approach to disease control within a country;
- Following a disease outbreak, compartmentalisation may be able to take advantage of epidemiological linkages among groups of animals despite diverse geographical locations, to facilitate disease control;
- Zoning may encourage the more efficient use of resources within certain parts of a country to allow trade in certain commodities from that zone in accordance with the Terrestrial Code;
- Compartmentalisation may allow safe trade due to the functional separation of a subpopulation from other domestic or wild animals through biosecurity measures, which a zone (through geographical separation alone) would not achieve.

The chapter on zoning and compartmentalisation in the Terrestrial Code serves to assist OIE Member Countries to establish and maintain different animal subpopulations within their national boundaries using these procedures. The chapter also outlines a process for trading partners to follow in achieving recognition of the health status of such subpopulations. These procedures are best implemented by trading partners through establishing parameters and gaining agreement on the necessary measures prior to disease outbreaks, rather than during outbreaks.

Specific requirements are being developed for each disease for which the application of zoning or compartmentalisation is considered appropriate.

The concepts

Zoning and compartmentalisation are procedures implemented by a country under the provisions of the Terrestrial or Aquatic Code, with a view to defining animal subpopulations of different health status within its territory for the purpose of disease control and/or international trade. Compartmentalisation applies to a subpopulation when commercial management systems related to biosecurity are applied, while zoning applies when a subpopulation is defined on a geographical basis.

The following definitions have been adopted for the Terrestrial Code (the definitions in the Aquatic Code as very similar):

Zone/Region means a clearly defined part of a country containing an animal sub-population with a distinct health status with respect to a specific disease for which required surveillance, control and biosecurity measures have been applied for the purpose of international trade.

Compartment means one or more establishments (premises in which animals are kept) under a common biosecurity management system containing an animal sub-population with a distinct health status with respect to a specific disease or specific diseases for which required surveillance, control and biosecurity measures have been applied for the purpose of international trade.

The fundamental requirement for application of either concept is that the subpopulation maintains a functional separation through geographic/legal boundaries or management, which allows a clear epidemiological differentiation from populations of different health status. The measures taken to ensure the identification of the sub-population, and the recognition and maintenance of its health status, need to be documented in detail.

General considerations

Before trade in animals or their products may occur, an importing country needs to be satisfied that its animal health status will be appropriately protected. In most cases, the import regulations developed will rely in part on judgements made about the effectiveness of animal health procedures undertaken by the exporting country, both at its boundaries and within its territory.

An exporting country which is establishing a zone or compartment within its territory for international trade purposes should clearly define the animal subpopulation in accordance with the measures stipulated in the relevant chapters in the Terrestrial or Aquatic Code, and should be able to explain to an importing country the basis for its claim of a distinct animal health status for the zone or compartment in such terms.

The procedures used to establish and maintain the distinct health status of a zone or compartment should be appropriate to the particular circumstances, and will depend on:

- the epidemiology of the disease (including methods of disease spread and species affected);
- environmental factors (including the presence of natural barriers);
- appropriate and applicable biosecurity measures, (including movement controls, use of natural and artificial boundaries, commercial management and husbandry practices); and

- disease surveillance (including seasonal factors and intermediate hosts).

The exporting country should be able to demonstrate, through detailed documentation published via official channels, that it has implemented the measures stipulated in the Terrestrial or Aquatic Code for establishing and maintaining such a zone or compartment, based on the claimed health status of the animal subpopulation. In such a case, an importing country should recognise the existence of this zone or compartment and accept the application of the appropriate measures recommended in the Terrestrial or Aquatic Code corresponding to the animal health status of the zone or compartment with regard to the importation of commodities from the zone or compartment.

Principles for defining a zone or compartment

In conjunction with the above considerations, defining a zone or compartment should be based on the following principles:

- The extent of a zone and its limits should be established by the Veterinary Administration on the basis of natural, artificial or legal boundaries, and made public through official channels;
- The requirements regarding a compartment should be established by the Veterinary Administration on the basis of relevant criteria such as biosecurity management and husbandry practices, and made public through official channels;
- Animals and herds belonging to subpopulations should be clearly recognizable as such. The Veterinary Administration should document in detail the measures taken to ensure the identification of the subpopulation;
- The measures necessary to establish and maintain the distinct health status of a zone or compartment should be appropriate to the particular disease.

Thus defined, the zones and compartments constitute the relevant subpopulations for the application of the disease specific recommendations in the Terrestrial and Aquatic Codes.

Sequence of steps to be taken in defining a zone or compartment

There is no single sequence of steps which must be followed in defining a zone or a compartment. The steps that trading partners choose will generally depend on the circumstances existing within a country and at its borders. The recommended steps are:

- For zoning:
 - the exporting country identifies a geographical area within its territory which it considers to contain an animal subpopulation with a distinct health status with respect to a specific disease/specific diseases, based on surveillance and monitoring;
 - the exporting country identifies the procedures which are being, or could be, employed to distinguish epidemiologically the animal sub-population in the area from those in other parts of its territory, in accordance with the measures stipulated in the Terrestrial or Aquatic Code;
 - the exporting country provides the above information to the importing country, and proposes that the area be treated as an epidemiologically separate zone for international trade purposes;
 - the importing country determines whether it may accept such an area as a zone for the importation of animals and animal products, taking into account:
 - an evaluation of the exporting country's Veterinary Services/competent authorities, according to the OIE Codes;
 - the result of a risk assessment based on the information provided by the exporting country and on its own research;
 - its own animal health situation with respect to the disease(s) concerned; and
 - other relevant OIE standards;
 - the importing country notifies the exporting country of its determination and the underlying reasons, within a reasonable period of time, being either:

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- recognition of the zone; in which case, the importing country and the exporting country may enter into a formal agreement defining the zone;
 - request for further information; or
 - rejection of the area as a zone for international trade purposes;
 - For compartmentalisation:
 - based on discussions with the relevant enterprise/industry, the exporting country identifies within its territory one or more establishments or other premises owned by an enterprise(s) which operates under a common biosecurity management system, and which it considers contains an animal subpopulation with a distinct health status with respect to a specific disease/specific diseases;
 - the exporting country jointly examines the 'biosecurity management manual' produced by the enterprise/industry for such establishment(s), and confirms through an audit that:
 - such establishment(s) is(are) epidemiologically closed throughout routine operating procedures as a result of effective implementation of its 'biosecurity management manual' and;
 - the surveillance and monitoring programme in place is appropriate to verify the free status of such establishment(s) with respect to such disease(s);
 - the exporting country identifies such an enterprise to be a free compartment, in accordance with the measures stipulated in the Terrestrial or Aquatic Code;
 - the exporting country provides the information above to the importing country, and proposes that such an enterprise be treated as an epidemiologically separated compartment for international trade purposes;
 - the importing country determines whether it may accept such an enterprise as a compartment for the importation of animals and animal products, taking into account:
 - an evaluation of the exporting country's Veterinary Services/competent authorities, according to the OIE Codes;
 - the result of a risk assessment based on the information provided by the exporting country and on its own research;
 - its own animal health situation with respect to the disease(s) concerned; and
 - other relevant OIE standards;
 - the importing country notifies the exporting country of its determination and the underlying reasons, within a reasonable period of time, being either:
 - recognition of the compartment; in which case, the importing country and the exporting country may enter into a formal agreement defining the compartment;
 - request for further information; or
 - rejection of such an enterprise as a compartment for international trade purposes;

An attempt should be made to resolve any differences of opinion over the definition of the zone or compartment, either in the interim or finally, by using an agreed mechanism to reach consensus (such as the OIE dispute settlement mechanism).

Related issues

1 Evaluation of Veterinary Services

The quality of the Veterinary Services of a country depends on a set of factors, which include fundamental principles of an ethical, organisational and technical nature. Compliance with these fundamental principles by the Veterinary Services of a Member Country is important to the establishment and maintenance of confidence in its international veterinary certificates, and in its activities regarding the establishment and maintenance of zones and compartments.

The same fundamental principles apply in countries where the responsibility for establishing or applying certain animal health measures, or issuing international health certificates is exercised by an organisation other than the Veterinary Services.

The quality of Veterinary Services can be measured through an evaluation, the general principles of which are described in the *Terrestrial Code*. Such an evaluation is an important element in the risk analysis process which countries may legitimately use in determining policy relating to international trade in animals, animal-derived products, animal genetic material and animal feedstuffs. Key elements to be covered in an evaluation include resource adequacy, management capability, legislative and administrative infrastructures, independence in the exercise of official functions and performance history, including disease reporting.

2 Official recognition of animal health status

The OIE has a mandate to examine upon request from a Member Country its claims for a particular status with regard to four of the OIE listed diseases: foot and mouth disease (FMD), rinderpest, contagious bovine pleuropneumonia and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). The OIE does not routinely classify its Member Countries with respect to their animal health status for other listed diseases.

The procedure requires that the Member Country provide evidence that it complies with all the relevant provisions of the *Terrestrial Code* and *Manual* with respect to the disease for which free status is being sought, either for the whole country, or for a zone or compartment within the country.

As the procedure concludes with an official recognition by the OIE of the status of the Member Country for that disease (through a formal resolution of the OIE International Committee), other OIE Member Countries have an obligation to take that recognition into account when developing import health measures for commodities from that Member Country.