

FESASS' views regarding the management of Culicoides Vector-borne Diseases (BTV & EHD)



FESASS

*Fédération Européenne pour la Santé Animale
et la Sécurité Sanitaire*



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This note presents FESASS' thoughts regarding the management of BTV and EHD vector-borne diseases. We submitted it to a joint working group of experts from our organisations and experts from the competent authorities of the Member States where FESASS is represented, as part of an open and prospective exchange. We have incorporated the comments and suggestions made on this occasion. The conclusions of this work and recommendations have now been submitted to the FESASS General Assembly. We then wish to submit them to the CVO Working Party, the Commission, and other stakeholders.

1. The context and objectives

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Europe has been faced with a significant increase in the frequency and intensity of outbreaks of BTV and other Culicoides diseases.

This problem has worsened over the last two years. Farmers and the competent authorities have had to face a new and highly pathogenic strain of BTV serotype 8, the rapid spread of serotype 3 in continental Europe and Sardinia, the coexistence of other serotypes within several national or regional territories, and the emergence of serotype 12 in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the progression of EHD has joined BTV in Spain, Portugal, and France, making surveillance and control more complex.

Added to this epidemiological complexity are the consequences arising from the categorisation of BTV (CDE) and EHD (DE). This categorisation certainly allows greater management flexibility at Member State level but leads to a greater diversity of situations due to different demands and strategic choices from one Member State to another. In fact, surveillance, vaccination, movement management and solidarity/compensation strategies vary from one Member State to another.

Faced with this situation, many voices have been raised calling for better coordination in the face of these diseases, and various initiatives have been developed. FESASS has set up an internal working group, brought the matter to DG SANTE's Advisory Committee on Animal Health and, with MEP Benoît CASSART, organised a workshop at the European Parliament on these issues.

We are indeed convinced of the need for a stronger coordination to guarantee greater efficiency in dealing with these invasive diseases, which are becoming enzootic. We are also aware of our

increased responsibility alongside the veterinary services in the management of these diseases due to their categorisation as CDE or DE.

First, it is imperative to work on this coordination for the 2025 campaign. We must take advantage of the current period to learn from the experience of the last two years and build a management strategy that is as general as possible. But these diseases will be increasingly present in the EU in the future, with other exotic serotypes and even the emergence of new strains. Therefore, we also need to think about our longer-term strategy.

2. Short term approach

FESASS considers that **in the short term, the objective of managing BTV and EHD should be to control these diseases by using two essential tools - vaccination and zoning - to slow down the geographical spread of these diseases and reduce their impact on animal health.**

A considerable proportion of these conclusions and recommendations also concern the longer-term approach. However, they are urgent in order to ensure a response tailored to the sector's needs, as of this year. They are highlighted in green.

a. The key role of massive vaccination

It is essential to support vaccination against BTV and EHD in 2025. However, vaccination should remain voluntary, so that farmers, with the support of their vets, can choose according to the risks and needs of their farms. This approach should enable a better allocation of available vaccine stocks and resources.

The aim is to be able to vaccinate against all BTV serotypes present in the territories concerned, as well as against EHD where it is also present. Here, a strong coordination between the competent authorities of neighbouring Member States is required. It is also advantageous to encourage preventive vaccination in buffer zones.

Key elements for effective coordination/cooperation

- **Deliver a strong, common message on the priority given to vaccination**, to enable laboratories, vets, and farmers to organise themselves.
- **Develop joint incentives to encourage vaccination** in areas where it is necessary (drivers like awareness campaigns, financial support, possibility for farmers to vaccinate under veterinarian guidance, etc.).
- **Improving the security of vaccine availability**, which means obtaining an agreement at European level on the geographical distribution of the quantities of vaccines available between the areas concerned and according to sensitive species => urgent concertation between Competent Authorities, vaccine manufacturers and Farmer Representatives.
- **Strengthen the value of vaccination** regarding animal movement between Member States.

b. Protect free areas and free Member States

The zoning policy for vector-borne diseases is difficult but remains an effective tool if it is combined with a policy of preventive vaccination and good surveillance, depending on the country size. Indeed, within a single Member State, it is possible to protect areas that are still free of the disease by slowing its spread (or even stopping it?). In addition, it enables trade to be maintained between the disease-free zones of a Member State of origin and other Member States.

For FESASS, it is therefore important to **maintain and encourage this zoning policy**. This requires accurate information on the epidemiological situation (see section on surveillance below).

The aim of the zoning policy is to clarify health management measures between different zones and to regulate the movement of live animals. This approach also requires a certain **coordination/cooperation between Member States in border areas**. FESASS encourages pragmatism to allow movement between border zones with the same health status (e.g. with the same BTV serotype).

c. Simplified and harmonised movement derogations

The new regulation, which no longer allows bilateral agreements, has not helped to simplify the requirements for animal movements between Member States in the case of BTV and EHD. Of course, strict health standards must be observed, and **trade must not jeopardise the health status of farms or that of the country of destination**.

Within the framework of the current categorisation, it would be useful if the competent authorities that have decided to grant derogations for BTV and EHD could work together to **harmonise and simplify the rules**. The aim is to make them easier to understand and apply.

This work should be conducted rapidly to **improve the fluidity of trade while maintaining the level of health guarantees**. Although this is an issue that fully lies within the veterinary services, FESASS is ready to contribute to the search for operational solutions in the short term as well as in the longer term.

d. **Strengthened surveillance**

Surveillance is vital to ensure early detection of vector-borne diseases and to monitor the epidemiological situation, as well as to ensure vaccine effectiveness and secure trade. Given the characteristics of BTV and EHD and the distribution of Culicoides populations, it is essential that this surveillance is conducted in cooperation between Member States.

FESASS considers that some of the conclusions of the CVOs workshop organised with the Spanish Presidency in 2023 should be implemented from 2025. More specifically, this involves:

- The interest of **targeted surveillance in “at risk” areas** (e.g. the vicinity of airports, harbours and transport corridors or wetlands favourable to the proliferation of vectors) for early detection of emergent vector-borne diseases.

We are aware that with several serotypes circulating, and with vaccination, specific protocols will have to be adopted for sentinel farms. It's crucial to avoid new serotypes passing by undetected!

- The need for **entomological surveillance** conducted by the Public Health, Animal Health and Environment Units should be coordinated, optimizing resources and taking advantage of the synergies. Culicoides surveillance is not a priority for European public health today. However, the increasing number of outbreaks of exotic diseases also requires vigilance in this area. Oropouche fever, which has been spreading since 2023 in certain areas of South America and the Caribbean, is an example of a serious threat, even if *Culicoides paraensis*, the vector of this disease, is not present on our continent. Another important and practical reason for this surveillance is to determine the vector-free seasons. Our local organisations can be involved in this surveillance by trapping vectors.
- The need for immediate surveys to collect data, on farms, in the event of an emerging disease, to **assess its clinical impact** and to create a more efficient monitoring system.

In the new era of genomics, it will be beneficial **to assess recent technologies for accurate and faster identification of vectors and associated viruses.**

Furthermore, it is ensured that once a country is affected by BTV or EHD, it is no longer free to move to other Member States, regardless of the number of serotypes in circulation or the areas affected. However, it is particularly important that countries have access to all this information for disease management, as well as animal movement management and prevention work. While epidemiological information may be available on the websites of national authorities, **it would be useful to have a European database that countries could use to share and consult information** to take appropriate surveillance and vaccination measures. The management of this database could be entrusted to the EU Reference Laboratory and its input to the National Competent Authorities or to the network of National Reference Laboratories.

FESASS also proposes that **a European map showing where the various serotypes are present**, will be produced and updated (as frequently as possible) using this database, with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence if necessary. This document would provide a clear picture of the guarantees required to ensure safe trade.

Strengthening the surveillance of Culicoides vector-borne diseases and their vectors is **a shared responsibility of the public services and the sector**. It is also part of the One Health approach.

3. Long term approach

The frequency of vector-borne diseases arriving in Europe has risen sharply. We need to learn to live with these diseases and adapt our strategy accordingly. This depends on our objective: **should we maintain the goal of eradication or simply control these diseases? Or should we leave each farmer to manage their own risks?**

Such a choice will require time and will be a key political decision based on a new scientific assessment from EFSA. In the meantime, it is urgent to analyse the possibility of re-categorisation of BTV and EHD. The current evaluation of the Animal Health Law is a good opportunity to undertake this work and also re-assess the list of susceptible species.

There is also the issue of a different categorisation depending on the enzootic or exotic status of the different serotypes of these diseases. It would indeed be crucial to have the appropriate regulatory framework and control measures to rapidly eradicate an exotic serotype, provided it can be detected early on after its introduction into the European Union. EFSA's opinion is therefore essential. This specific reflection must therefore be a long-term process, but the stakes are high.

In parallel, it will be necessary to make a distinction in the Animal Health Law between Culicoides vector-borne diseases and contact diseases. One of the aims of this distinction will be to improve procedures for the movement of live animals in the event of Culicoides vector-borne diseases.

a. Surveillance for early detection

We suggest using the main proposals of the workshop organised with the Spanish Presidency on this subject and already mentioned in the section devoted to measures for 2025. It will be necessary to consolidate this approach to ensure its sustainability and funding.

It will also be necessary to rely on surveillance and research to improve our knowledge of vectors, diseases, and their pathogenicity.

b. Vaccines

This is one of the key aspects of vector-borne disease prevention. Experience has taught us the importance of anticipation and the need to devise solutions at European level.

Some key elements that could be supported:

- Creation and maintenance of an open database at international level for the centralization of all genetic sequences of Orbivirus strains available in NRLs.
- Develop multivalent vaccines to ensure better coverage, facilitate the vaccination process and help to manage the cost
- Increase support for the creation of more antigen, vaccine, and diagnostic reagent banks to improve the EU's readiness.
- Introduction of a European Temporary Emergency Marketing Authorisation for vaccines to improve the rapid availability of new vaccines against vector-borne diseases.
- Develop a partnership between stakeholders, CVOs, and producers to better predict the vaccine demand and the means to secure it.

c. Additional proposals

- Work to **adapt the international standards on vector-borne diseases** (WOAH Code).
- **Develop genetic resistance to vector-borne diseases** as observed in certain equatorial and tropical zones.
- Research project to **develop a decision-making tool** (based on the profile of vector-borne diseases), making it possible to adjust movement management and vaccination measures.
- Use natural immunity if feasible/available => **Create a new movement derogation** based on a positive PCR + 60 days.
- An essential element concerns the mobilisation of farmers and the funding of the various measures to be implemented. It is therefore vital to assess the economic impact of outbreaks, along the food supply-chain. This would allow for the **identification of stakeholders interested** in the effective management of these diseases and can **contribute to the budget for surveillance, vaccination, and investigation**, alongside the competent authorities and the farmers.
- **Strengthen international cooperation**, particularly in the Mediterranean Basin, by using existing tools and networks to improve vigilance against vector-borne diseases.

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