

Vaccinating foxes: European funding helps eradicate rabies from Serbia

The number of rabies cases identified in Serbia has fallen by more than 95% since an EU-funded programme was launched to control and eradicate classical swine fever and rabies in the country. The advances are protecting public health in Serbia and limiting the threat that these diseases will re-emerge across Europe.

A REAL HEALTH HAZARD

Rabies remains a health hazard across the Western Balkans. In Serbia, an average of 200 animals were infected each year between 2000 and 2010, mostly among the red fox population in the country's woodlands. Health authorities and veterinary institutes have managed to prevent the epidemic from spreading to humans, notably by requiring owners that their domestic animals be registered and tagged. And now, with the assistance of this programme, they are also fighting off the disease in the wild.

OUTFOXING RABIES

The cornerstone of the program is a five-year initiative to inoculate every fox in the country against rabies. The Ministry of Agriculture is working alongside European donors and veterinary institutes in Kraljevo, Novi Sad and Belgrade to spread vaccine capsules concealed in biscuits that entice the mammals. Some of this bait is distributed on foot, but most is dropped from small aeroplanes. The EU has funded scientific equipment, disease-surveillance systems and a dozen refrigerated vehicles for the task. Already, more than 11 million doses of the vaccine have been spread in the wild, and millions more will be distributed before the programme is completed.

"European funds have made it possible to set up modern laboratories and implement proven measures to eradicate

rabies from our country," said Zoran Debeljak, Director of the Specialised Veterinary Institute Kraljevo.

New equipment has improved the diagnostic capabilities of his team and boosted safety practices in his laboratory. He also believes that such centres offer an additional line of defence in the event of an outbreak. "Our rapid response teams are trained to intervene anywhere in Serbia within less than six hours," said Debeljak. "This is unprecedented."

DRAMATIC FALL IN RABIES CASES

The number of rabies cases dropped from 185 to 46 in the year following the launch of the EU-funded programme. Only four rabies infections were registered in 2013 – marking a promising step towards the complete eradication of rabies in the region. As the first country in the West Balkans to conduct oral vaccination of wild foxes, Serbia is bringing its measures in line with those of European countries that are already rabies-free, and are driving the disease further from their borders.

The programme is also tackling classical swine flu within Serbia, by strengthening biosecurity measures in farms. A national campaign to raise awareness of the disease is informing pig farmers of ways to prevent wild boars passing the disease onto their livestock. Eradicating classical



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swine flu and upgrading the monitoring of meat products would allow Serbia to export fresh pork to the EU's single market, which could boost national exports and attract foreign investment to the Serbian agricultural sector.

PROJECT DETAILS –

Technical Assistance to control and eradication of classical swine fever and rabies in the Republic of Serbia

Partners:

Opera Scarl, Italy
Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale dell' Abruzzo e del Molise, Italy
National Veterinary Research Institute, Poland
Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie, Italy
Agriconsulting Europe SA, Belgium

Total cost in €:

6 million + 1.93 million for technical assistance

EU Contribution in €:

7.93 million (100%)

Start date:

2008

End date:

2013

Results:

Control, eradication and monitoring of rabies;
measures to limit classical swine flu

Techniques:

Direct grant; training;
provision of scientific equipment,
disease-surveillance systems
and specialised vehicles

