

GLOBAL ERADICATION OF RINDERPEST : THE FINAL ACT.

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Rinderpest, a viral disease of cloven-hoofed animals has over the past centuries been regarded as an epizootic disease with devastating effects on naïve cattle populations in almost every corner of the globe. Efforts to control rinderpest in Europe in the last century led to the creation of the *Office International des Epizooties* (OIE) in 1924, now renamed *World Organisation for Animal Health*. Today, as we are close to global eradication of this disease, the OIE and the FAO, through the *Global Rinderpest Eradication Campaign* (GREP) are coordinating the final stages for verification of infection freedom. One of the factors that delayed the worldwide eradication of this disease was its endemic nature in some of the ecosystems and in some species. Lineage II of the rinderpest virus did not behave according to textbook symptomatology, but remained sub-clinical and therefore endemic in major parts of the horn of Africa, commonly referred to as the *Somali-EcoSystem* (SES) encompassing parts of Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia. Lineage II in its natural environment, only led to clinical and lethal outbreaks in wildlife species such as African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*), hence the major role played by surveillance of wildlife in achieving the eradication of the disease in Africa. This does not suggest the virus did not have the potential, taken out of its ecological context, to cause mortality in cattle, as proven by severe disease in grade cattle in experimental infection. The last confirmed outbreak of rinderpest occurred in wild African buffalo in Meru National Park (Kenya) in 2001, while cross-species serological monitoring of so-called mild rinderpest in the SES, and participatory search techniques significantly contributed to rinderpest eradication from that area.

Today on a worldwide level, almost all countries known to keep rinderpest susceptible livestock have been recognized by the OIE as being officially free from rinderpest infection. There is no doubt that the handful of remaining countries are in the process of submitting the documented evidence to OIE for evaluation and that the epidemiological situation in their corresponding region has not indicated any circulation of the disease or its virus in the natural host for many years. In addition, the global eradication of rinderpest demands that the international community establishes an inventory on existing rinderpest virus stocks in order to prevent the re-emergence of the disease through release of rinderpest virus from laboratory sources. To this end FAO and OIE are committed to establish the principles of international oversight and regulations for facilities holding rinderpest virus containing material. Specific guidelines are being developed to ensure secure handling and sequestration of rinderpest virus in the post-eradication era. Additionally, countries are encouraged to reduce the number of rinderpest virus repositories in order to minimise the risk of accidental release.

If everything goes according to plan, worldwide rinderpest eradication could be announced jointly by the two Directors General of OIE and FAO, on both occasions, during the May 2011 OIE General Session and the June 2011 FAO Conference. Thirty one years after smallpox was eradicated by the *World Health Organisation* (WHO), rinderpest will be the second disease ever eradicated from the planet and this is considered a major achievement for the veterinary (livestock and wildlife) community.