



Opinion 05-2023 of the Scientific Committee established at the FASFC on the draft royal decree on the control of enzootic bovine leucosis

Background & Terms of reference

Belgium has been officially free of enzootic bovine leucosis since 2003. To maintain its status, Belgium set up a surveillance programme coordinated by the FASFC in collaboration with recognised animal health associations (ARSIA and DGZ).

The Belgian legislation on the control of enzootic bovine leucosis needs to be updated because certain measures in the current Royal Decree are no longer relevant. This draft Royal Decree also takes into account the adaptations related to the provisions contained in the Animal Health Law (AHL, Regulation (EU) 2016/429 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on transmissible animal diseases and amending and repealing certain acts in the area of animal health).

The Scientific Committee is asked to give an opinion on the draft Royal Decree on the control of enzootic bovine leucosis.

Method

This opinion was carried out on the basis of expert opinion and available and relevant data in the scientific literature.

Conclusions

The Scientific Committee gives a favourable opinion on the draft Royal Decree on the control of enzootic bovine leucosis and makes a number of general and specific observations.

Recommendations

Two major recommendations were made on the basis of a risk assessment:

- The Scientific Committee recommends that all animals in an establishment, including those under 12 months of age, should be tested in the following situations: (1) when acquiring animals from a Member State or region not free of enzootic bovine leucosis or imported from a third country; (2) during the further follow-up of an establishment where not all cattle were slaughtered as part of a sanitation plan; (3) when serological testing is carried out in a suspected establishment. Indeed, young animals can also be infected, leading to the persistence of infection within herds and causing transmission to uninfected cattle.
- Since the median time to seroconversion is estimated to be 57 days (Monti *et al.*, 2005), and that it can vary depending on different factors and can be as long as 273 days in the case of animal-to-animal transmission and detection by AGID, the Scientific Committee recommends performing two serological tests at an interval of 6 months instead of the foreseen 4 months in order to be able to release an outbreak where not all cattle were slaughtered. Indeed, increasing the interval between the two serological tests reduces the risk of non-detection of animals in which seroconversion occurred only later after infection.

In addition, the Scientific Committee recommends :

- to complete the references to legislation, in particular those to the AHL. This will enable the reader to refer, when necessary, to other texts supplementing this Royal Decree or to the definitions of technical terms of this Royal Decree that are already defined therein (e.g. Article 4 of Regulation (EU) 2016/429 for all definitions such as “establishment”, “closed establishment”, “biosecurity”, “outbreak”, etc.);
- to clarify the conditions under which the country 's free of enzootic bovine leucosis status can be lost or regained in the Royal Decree;
- to provide a link to a current list of countries not free of enzootic bovine leucosis;
- to define the practical arrangements to be applied in the context of the derogation from the regulations concerning offspring under 24 months of age from positive dams who may remain in the establishment. If these offspring are monitored for a minimum of 6 months, their positivity or negativity can be confirmed according to the sensitivity and specificity of the tests available and it may be decided not to slaughter these animals if they are negative;
- to define which type of sample should be taken and analysed according to the diagnostic test in case of suspicion of enzootic bovine leucosis at the *post-mortem* inspection;
- to pay particular attention to the implementation of continuous training of veterinarians performing *post-mortem* inspections in order to make them aware of the detection of enzootic bovine leucosis even if they have never been confronted with a clinical case of enzootic bovine leucosis.

The full text is available on this website in dutch and in french.