

**Opening Speech of the Director General of the World Organisation for Animal Health
Conference of the Regional Commission for Europe – Catania, Italy
Opening ceremony**

4 October 2022

Authorities attending the opening

Your Excellency, Mr Roberto SPERANZA, Minister of Health for Italy

Your Excellency Ambassador Carlos Cherniak, Chair of the Livestock Subcommittee of the FAO Committee on Agriculture

Dr Hugo Federico Idoyaga Benítez, President of the World Assembly of Delegates

Dr Christianne Brusckke, Vice-President of the World Assembly of Delegates, member of WOAHC Council and Delegate of The Netherlands (representing Dr Hugo Federico Idoyaga Benítez, President of the World Assembly of Delegates .

Dr Maris Balodis, Delegate of Latvia and President of the OIE Regional Commission for Europe;

Dr Etienne Bonbon, President of WOAHC Terrestrial Animal Health Code Commission;

Dr Davide Lecchini, Delegate of Italy;

Representatives of International and Regional Organisations

Dear Delegates;

Dear Participants;

This is an honour and my pleasure to welcome you to the 30th Conference of the Regional Commission for Europe, especially after a few years without meeting in person in a Regional Conference. The last time the Conference of the Regional Commission for Europe gathered in this format was in Georgia, in September 2018. Today, we are resuming face-to-face activities after two difficult years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Your Excellencies, Delegates, and participants, having you all here in Catania, is already a success, a success for the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), and a success for Italy that was expecting and planning to welcome us since two years ago, when we had to postpone the 29th Conference and hold it virtually. The good attendance today confirms your desire and eagerness to meet in this format. And I am convinced that the discussions in person and the networking will be beneficial to all participants and to our mission.

Your Excellency the Minister, let me warmly thank you and the Italian leadership, for having reiterated your interest in hosting this important event for the Region. Thanks to that, we are all here this week in beautiful Catania, which has a rich history, enjoying its charm, beauty, and the Sicilian hospitality. I can confidently say that all the Members of the Regional Commission also share my sentiments.

Thank you for having us here.

I take the opportunity at this opening ceremony to congratulate Italy and Mr Roberto Speranza, Minister of Health, for the commitment to animal health and welfare, particularly with the activities of WOAHC. Italy has always been a very active and supporting Member to our activities. Italy hosts an important number of WOAHC Reference Centres; 28 Reference Laboratories specialising in various animal diseases and the 10 Collaborating Centres focusing on more transversal topics, notably through the network of *Istituti Zooprofilattici Sperimentali* (IZSs). Our network of Reference Centres constitutes the core of our scientific expertise to ensure that our standards, guidelines and recommendations are scientifically sound and up to date.

The Conference is a unique opportunity for the Delegates of the Commission to collectively discuss and make recommendations on the main animal health and welfare concerns of the Region. It is happening at a time when several challenges are faced by our Members such as disrupted food and feed supply chains, rising commodities prices and the effects on economies as well as on animal production systems, the increasing concerns related to the protection of the biodiversity while risks from the wildlife sector have to be better addressed. This requires that the Veterinary Services to constantly rethink and adapt their policies, and advocate at political level for investments in animal health to demonstrate our contribution to the One Health Approach.

Indeed, the Italian Presidency of the G20 has been instrumental to raise awareness and foster G20 Members' commitment to increase One Health investments, notably to accelerate pandemic prevention and response mechanisms.

Therefore, I will later this morning, open a discussion following my keynote presentation regarding the role of WOAHA, in improving animal health and welfare worldwide, and how this contributes to global health governance.

Dear Delegates,

Let me to also thank the Bureau of the Regional Commission, who ensured that regional expectations were included in the agenda of the Conference. This gives me the confidence that we will have rich discussions, exchange of ideas and proposals by all Members and partners. The Conference will cover important topics and as it will take long to highlight the importance of each topic, I will only point out a few.

Two technical items will be presented for discussion; for the first time since the Conference in Georgia. Technical Item 1, developed by Dra Daniela Morelli from Multinational WOAHA Collaborating Centre for Animal Welfare, IZS Teramo, and will focus on animal welfare during long distance transport of live animals by land and sea and presents Members' feedback after the questionnaire. Transport of animals is one of the five priority topics of the Regional Platform on Animal Welfare for Europe. In this framework there is a series of activities to strengthen the collaboration between Competent Authorities and partners within the Region and with neighbouring Regions such as Africa, and the Middle East. Let me remind that- in addition- the platform works on slaughter, dog population management, working equids and animal welfare in disasters, many topics that can also inspire projects in other regions.

The second technical item, presented by Professor Ian Brown a world-renowned expert from the Reference Laboratory for Avian Influenza, Animal and Plant Health Agency in UK, and Chair of the OFFLU network, will address high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) and vaccination. We will learn about new developments in vaccine design, impact of vaccinations, stakeholders' roles including the supervision and control of the Veterinary Authority. That is for our Organisation, the starting point of a reflection that we wish to conduct over the next few months on the strategy for influenza control.

These two topics (on animal welfare as well as on avian influenza) are very important topics in the Region, and Delegates will have the opportunity to develop and adopt recommendations that will be presented next year to the World Assembly for endorsement. As these recommendations will support the work of the Organisation and its Members, here in Europe as well as in other regions, I trust that you will carefully look at them, how they contribute to our animal health policies, strategies and standards.

As previously said, challenges are many- we have therefore included other topics of interest in the conference agenda - A session will be dedicated to One Health. WOAHA has indeed been promoting the One Health approach for several years and I am pleased to say that over the past years, progress has been achieved in this regard. You will recall that during the 29th Regional Conference in November 2020, together with our partners mainly FAO and WHO, we briefly discussed joint activities and the potential for future collaboration. The main aim was to support our Members to involve the Veterinary Services in the application of the One Health concept in the Region. Last year, the Regional Representatives signed a letter of intent and formally established the Regional One Health mechanism. A month ago, UNEP joined, following the global example, creating the regional Quadripartite Alliance. Thus, dear colleagues, I look forward to productive discussions among Delegates and partners, sharing your experience, best practices, expectations, including the constraints regarding the implementation of OH. The discussion is important at a time when negotiations are underway under the auspices of the WHO for the preparation of an international Accord on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

The last issue I would like to highlight is digital transformation, with a data management strategy, because digital transformation is one of the key elements to respond to the current global challenges. The Veterinary Services need data driven and evidenced based decisions. WOAHA is committed to digital transformation and encourages Members to also consider this important advancement. This will ensure effective early warning and response systems and data exchange, which will be demonstrated when we are presented with the report on the animal health situation in Europe that relies on Members' disease data notified through WAHIS.

Excellencies, Delegates, and participants

Before I conclude, I invite you to take advantage of this week to strengthen the ties of cooperation between your colleagues as well as with partners, to build strong relationships and to increase our engagement and contribution to improve animal health globally. Please, take advantage of the conference to interact with WOAHA Representatives, namely Budimir Plavsic, Mereke Taitubayev and Estelle Hamelin recently appointed as Representative, and share with them your expectations and needs.

As a conclusion, allow me once again to express my sincere gratitude to the Italian authorities for inviting us to Catania, to the Ministry of Health for the preparation of the Conference and to all our colleagues from Italy for their sincere welcome and the excellent hospitality.

I wish you all a successful Conference and a pleasant stay in Catania.
