East Africa sets out regional plan to fight Rift Valley fever

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Leading experts in **animal health** and public health from 11 countries developed a regional plan of action against the Rift Valley fever outbreak in **East Africa** at a high-level meeting in Tanzania, 28-30 August.

Rift Valley fever is a disease that affects and kills humans and animals. It is caused by a virus spread by blood sucking mosquitoes, and can be transmitted to those individuals who are in close contact with contaminated blood, such as veterinarians, butchers, or animal handlers. Currently, the epidemic has been reported in four countries in East Africa but all countries in the region are at risk.

The viral disease has so far caused considerable human and animal deaths and has potential to have a huge negative impact on the livestock trade, as well as the livelihoods of thousands of communities that rely on the health of their sheep, goat, cattle and camels.

The Chief Veterinary Officers and high-level partners were called together by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the East African Community (EAC) at the first ever Rift Valley fever meeting to convene both animal and human health experts. The meeting was supported by the United States Agency for International Development, the German Epidemic Preparedness Team on behalf of German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Government of Japan.

“Rift Valley fever is a potentially devastating disease for farmers in **East Africa**. Only by harmonizing regional approaches into forecasting, preventing, detecting and responding to the disease, can it be stopped in its tracks. It is important that veterinary services act early to avoid spillover of the disease to humans,” said Juan Lubroth, Chief Veterinary Officer of FAO.

Regional situation

In **Tanzania** and other countries in the region the disease has not yet been reported, however, it is far more effective to act in advance of a disease outbreak than to react after it strikes. As Rift Valley fever is transmitted by mosquitoes, the risk of the disease’s geographical spread is believed to be increasing as climate change leads to longer and more frequent rainy seasons.

In order to protect lives and livelihoods from emerging and re-emerging Rift Valley fever, leaders gathered from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, Uganda, and the United Republic of Tanzania. Chief Veterinary Officers and public health officials shared knowledge and experience around surveillance, vaccination and eradication, and developed a regional plan of action, which recognizes the need for political will and financial resources, will to ensure that all countries have the mechanisms and tools to alert and respond to outbreaks.

“RVF is a classic transboundary disease capable of spreading beyond farm level, district, regional and international borders,” Tanzania Permanent Secretary for livestock and fisheries, Elisante Ole Gabriel, said at the opening of the meeting. “Efforts to manage and control the disease requires joint efforts between animal and human sectors, beyond borders and including the donor community. This gathering today is a true reflection of this resolution.”

All countries agreed to strengthen the inclusion of experts from human, animal and environmental health in One Health Rift Valley fever working groups. Rift Valley fever affects animals, humans and the environment, so through these strengthened platforms, countries will work with their respective Ministries of Agriculture, Livestock, Environment and Health to develop more comprehensive preparedness and contingency plans.

Risk assessment

Assessing the risk of **Rift Valley fever** is essential for effective prevention and detection of the disease. Risk assessment guidelines will be reviewed at regional level in partnership with the governments and regional economic communities. This will lead to a strategic risk-based response including surveillance and vaccination. Surveillance of the disease will be improved and cases reported to the official international health bodies. As part of an

early-warning system in at risk areas, ‘sentinel’ flocks or herds will be established according to FAO guidelines so that the disease can be spotted and acted upon as quickly as possible.

Keeping a close eye on an outbreak means testing samples regularly and in a timely manner. The plan includes setting up regional laboratories to act as a reference point for diagnosing the virus, as well as developing capacity for diagnosis at national level.

Vaccination is a critical tool in the fight against Rift Valley fever. Countries agreed to ensure that the vaccine used complies with international standards. When assessing national use of vaccines and the appropriate vaccination strategy, countries agreed to take into account the vaccine type and its side effects, disease ecology and risk of occurrence, and production and farming systems. The countries urge global and regional institutions to support scientific research into safe and cost-effective Rift Valley fever vaccines. High-level partners including the World Organisation for Animal Health, the World Health Organization and the African Union InterAfrican Bureau for Animal Resources supported development of the East African regional approach at the workshop.

Countries in **West** and **Central Africa** will come together in a meeting organized by FAO in September. A regional and continent approach to the disease is the only way to prevent Rift Valley fever causing devastation as it crosses species and national borders.

FAO Regional Office for Africa

Contacts