

World first: Cattle plague is declared eradicated

May 25 2011, by Richard Ingham



A cow licks its muzzle at a farm in Padukka, Sri Lanka. World farm monitors on Wednesday declared a cattle-killing virus that has been a curse through the ages had been wiped out, the first time an animal disease has been eradicated in human history.

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To prolonged applause from delegates, the global watchdog for farm-animal trade approved a report certifying that the last 14 countries of the world were free of rinderpest, also called cattle plague.

Highly contagious and often fatal among bovine species but not infectious for humans, the rinderpest virus has a destructive history

going back two thousand years.

The disease probably originated in the steppes of Central Asia before cutting through Europe, Asia and Africa, helped by trade.

It has ruined [livestock farmers](#) and unleashed famines that in turn have fuelled turbulence and war.

Stamping it out, a quest that can be traced back to 1920, brought together the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and national veterinary agencies.

Their prime weapons have been vaccines as well as routine surveillance, in which outbreaks are swiftly spotted by veterinarians and then circumscribed.

"It's a historic moment," said Bernard Vallat, director-general of the OIE, the Paris-based agency which oversees veterinary health among international trade in [farm animals](#).

"The world is free of rinderpest, its virus no longer circulates among animals," he told a press conference. "(...) A sword of Damocles that has been hanging over all our heads has now been lifted."

Ann Tutwiler, deputy director general of the FAO, said eradication massively boosted the fight against hunger and malnutrition, a problem expected to worsen through [population growth](#) and [climate change](#).

"We have a tremendous success that we can count today. It's a success that's born of cooperation, collaboration and partnership and most particularly knowledge," she said.

Rinderpest afflicts cattle, yaks, wildebeest and buffaloes but can also cause milder symptoms in cloven-footed animals, including sheep and goats. Animals become feverish, develop lesions in the mouth, diarrhoea and dehydration.

The disease has been blamed for devastating losses, borne especially by small farmers who may see their entire herd wiped out, although its impacts have also gone far beyond agriculture.

"Rinderpest epidemics and resulting losses preceded the fall of the Roman empire, the conquest of Christian Europe by Charlemagne and the impoverishment of Russia," the FAO said.

"When rinderpest was introduced into sub-Saharan Africa, at the end of the 19th century, it triggered extensive famines and opened the way for the colonisation of Africa."

Asked to describe the achievement, veterinarians compared rinderpest eradication with that of smallpox, which was declared in 1979 to have been stamped out through a global vaccination campaign.

The OIE assembly agreed that remaining samples of the virus should be collected and destroyed except for a small number that should be kept in special labs under high security, to avoid accidental release or use in bioterrorism.

Guidelines for determining how this should be done, and which labs should be approved, will be hammered out in the coming months in meetings between OIE and FAO experts, the OIE said.

The future of the last stocks of smallpox virus, officially held in US and Russian labs, divided the World Health Organisation (WHO) at its assembly on Tuesday. Negotiations on the issue have been postponed for

three years.

The last 14 countries to be declared free of the disease were Azerbaijan, the Bahamas, the Comores, Federated States of Micronesia, Gambia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Sao Tome, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emiraes.

The FAO will hold its own ceremonies in Rome next month, attended by agriculture ministers and some heads of state, to celebrate the breakthrough, Tutwiler said.

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