

**Communiqué from Dr Joseph Domenech, Chief Veterinary Officer, FAO**

**1. Emerging information regarding Influenza virus A/H1N1**

On 2 May 2009, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) announced that it had found H1N1 flu virus in a swine herd in Alberta, and that it was highly probable that the pigs were exposed to the virus from a Canadian who had recently returned from Mexico and had been exhibiting flu-like symptoms. Signs of illness were subsequently observed in the pigs. The individual has recovered and all of the pigs are recovering or have recovered. Further testing is underway to more fully characterize the virus, and to determine if the strain detected in the pigs is the same as the one circulating widely in humans.

Furthermore, recent sequencing results from CDC Atlanta made recently demonstrate that the Influenza A/H1N1 virus currently circulating among humans in the USA, Mexico and other parts of the world, contains genetic reassortment of three viruses which have been circulating in pigs in Europe, Asia and America since 1998. This new information suggests that the progenitor virus strain was a virus circulating in swine and has evolved in humans through gradual mutations over a 10-12 year span. It also contains avian and human components.

This new information highlights some important issues:

- Influenza viruses, whether in humans or among animals, are constantly evolving genetically, along with changes in their ability to cause morbidity and mortality in humans or animals. These changes may be gradual or very rapid.
- Strong surveillance and constant monitoring of suspicious events is critical for forecasting disease emergence and the prevention and control of new infectious diseases.
- Influenza viruses are capable of transmitting from humans to animals, as seems to be the case in the farm in Canada.. Good Biosecurity and hygiene practices are critical for preventing transmission from humans to animals or vice-versa.
- Swine Influenza virus circulation in pigs is not notifiable to OIE today but the occurrence of outbreaks of the new A/H1N1 Influenza virus in pigs should be reported to OIE and FAO.

FAO reiterates that the risk of infection of H1N1 virus through ingestion has never been established. If at all present, influenza viruses are rapidly killed when meat is cooked; and good hygiene practices during preparation of meat or pork products will ensure protection from infection.

**2. Priority actions recommended by FAO:**

National authorities are encouraged to carefully investigate possible occurrences of Influenza-like events in domestic animals. Virus samples may be collected and sent to national labs and/or international reference centres. National authorities can always get in touch with FAO, and by contacting [EMPRES-Shipping-Service@fao.org](mailto:EMPRES-Shipping-Service@fao.org), avail of support for transporting samples for laboratory testing. In order to reduce the risk for transmission of influenza A/H1N1 (humans-to-animals or animals-to-animals), FAO recommends the following:

- Case definitions for *suspect* and *probable cases* should be developed in collaboration with animal health partners and disseminated widely. Outbreak investigation protocols and laboratory sampling procedures should also be developed and disseminated to all veterinary professionals.
- Surveillance for porcine respiratory disease should be intensified and all cases of porcine respiratory syndrome should be immediately reported to the national veterinary authorities. The International Organizations -- OIE and FAO -- should be informed when presence of the new A/H1N1 Influenza virus is confirmed.
- Movement restrictions should be implemented for all farms or holdings with swine showing signs of clinical respiratory illness until diagnosis of the illness have been made. Where influenza A/H1N1 is confirmed, these restrictions should be in force until seven days after the last animal has recovered. Animals suffering from swine influenza can be separated from healthy herd-mates and allowed to recover; there is no need to cull affected animals.
- Animal handlers and veterinarians should wear protective gear to minimize risk of being infected by zoonotic agents, including influenza. Persons who work directly with swine should be urged not to go to work if they have any signs respiratory disease, fever or any influenza-like illness.
- In high risk areas a swine influenza vaccine could be used in swine as long as it is considered effective against the circulating strain, and is permitted by relevant authorities.