

Pacific Avian and Pandemic Influenza Taskforce

A new milestone of the Pacific Regional Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Project (PRIPPP) was reached recently with the establishment of the Pacific Avian and Pandemic Influenza Taskforce at a three-day meeting in Noumea.

Why create a taskforce for avian and pandemic influenza?

Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) are vulnerable to the introduction of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) A/H5N1, primarily through transboundary smuggling of infected poultry, migratory birds and trade in live poultry and poultry products. In order to address the possible threat of an influenza pandemic, PICTs need to have effective preparedness plans and the resources to implement them. PICTs must also be prepared to respond to emerging diseases, in line with the International Health Regulations.

The Pacific Avian and Pandemic Influenza Taskforce (PAPITaF) will provide a consultative forum on avian and pandemic influenza and related issues. It will allow Pacific Island professionals working on avian and pandemic influenza and related issues to share various experiences and procedures, and to benefit from technical expertise in these areas.

The Taskforce meeting

More than 90 human and animal health experts from Pacific governments, NGOs, and international and regional organisations gathered at SPC headquarters for the first Pacific Island Regional Pandemic Taskforce Meeting, held from 26–28 March. It was organised by SPC in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Agreeing on the composition and TORs of the taskforce

The main objective of the meeting was to agree formally on the composition and terms of reference (TORs) for the taskforce (see details below).

Terms of Reference Pacific Avian and Pandemic Influenza Taskforce (PAPITaF)

Composition of PAPITaF

- Representatives from Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) Avian/Pandemic Influenza Task Forces.
- Representatives from associated technical groups including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (UNOCHA), Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), World Health Organization (WHO) and other institutions such as Institute Pasteur New Caledonia (IPNC), WHO Collaborating Centre (Australia), Australian Animal Health Laboratory (AAHL).
- Donor technical representatives from Australia and New Zealand.
- The Pacific Regional Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Project (PRIPPP).

Terms of Reference of PAPITaF

1. Provide a regional forum on avian and pandemic influenza preparedness for representatives of relevant national institutions and regional and international organisations.
2. Undertake advocacy on and promotion of avian and pandemic influenza and related issues in the Pacific Islands region.
3. Advise on technical issues, policies and strategies on avian and influenza preparedness for the Pacific Islands context.
4. Communication with all sectors of the community, civil society and government on avian and pandemic influenza preparedness.

Channels of communication

- Meetings or as required
- Appropriate information technology channels
- Through the Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network (PPHSN) and Pacific Heads of Veterinary and Animal Production Services (PHOVAPS) established mechanisms

Coordination

Coordination of the Pacific Islands Pandemic Taskforce will go through the existing PPHSN and PHOVAPS mechanisms and be facilitated by PRIPPP.

Monitoring of PRIPPP

The PPHSN Coordination Body and PHOVAPS Advisory Group, with representation of identified/appropriate donors and technical agencies, to provide expert advice and feedback to SPC on the planning, implementation and monitoring of the PRIPPP including:

- i. Provide advice and monitor annual work plans and budgets
- ii. Review achievements and outcomes
- iii. Prioritize project activities as required
- iv. Review resource allocations.

Terms of Reference endorsed at the Taskforce meeting 28 March 2007

Sharing up-to-date information and experiences

Substantial time was given to update PICTs on technical developments in the area of pandemic preparedness planning. Experts from FAO, OIE, UNICEF, WHO and SPC made several presentations in this regard.

The meeting also provided an open forum for the discussion of PICT National Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Plans (NPIPPs). Eight of the 21 PICTs represented (Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tonga) made detailed presentations on the current status of their respective plans and the process by which they developed their NPIPPs. Some were asked to elaborate on their experience on specific issues pertinent to the updating and reviewing process for their respective NPIPP. Specific issues included: testing exercises of NPIPP component(s); the whole of government approach; the multisectoral nature of a national pandemic taskforce with a multisectoral approach to developing a national pandemic plan; a country with two separate animal health (HPAI) and human health (pandemic) preparedness plans and the challenge of harmonizing these into a single national response; piloting of the Pacific Island HPAI and Influenza Preparedness Checklist; the challenge of coordinating a response to a national crisis in a big country (as will be the case in Papua New Guinea); and using lessons learned from recent experience in responding to a national emergency, such as the Cyclone Heta experience in Niue (see separate article in this bulletin). Other PICTs shared their contextual experiences, comments, questions and inputs following these presentations.

Identifying support and technical assistance most needed by PICTs

Key areas in which PICTs require strategic support were identified during the meeting. Those are mentioned in the following recommendations of the meeting:

- A regional approach to be identified to address the shipping of samples, including agreements with airlines and shipping companies.
- A regional assessment of animal health laboratories capacity to be undertaken.
- PRIPPP and other agencies to support PICTs to prepare evidence-based public communication plans aligned to national avian and pandemic preparedness and response plans.
- Templates for public communication materials (e.g. information, education, and communication materials) to support public communication plans should be made available for adaptation by PICTs.

- PRIPPP and other stakeholders to help establish national stockpiles in a timely manner.
- PRIPPP to explore early warning system options in PICTs.
- PRIPPP to provide support to PICTs to undertake business continuity planning.

The list will certainly expand once the assessment of the national capacity of PICTs is completed by means of the 'Pacific Island HPAI and Influenza Preparedness Checklist'. Participants agreed that, 'The list of questions in the checklist should be used as a basis for PRIPPP to provide technical assistance to PICTs.'

The checklist was developed by the PRIPPP team at SPC prior to the meeting. It was first piloted in Tonga, revised and then fine-tuned during the meeting. The information in the checklist will assist PICTs to critically assess their pandemic influenza planning activities, and to develop an action plan to remedy any gaps or weaknesses. It will also enable identification of PRIPPP support for PICTs that is to be provided by SPC and other PPHSN partners.

Combining animal and human health efforts

The collaboration between the animal health and human health sectors is a key element of the PRIPPP project and the presence of the two sectors at the meeting was very important, especially for the establishment of the taskforce. This is also true for the taskforces created at the country level. On this regard, the participants recommended that, 'Communication between animal and human health agencies should be strengthened, both nationally and regionally.'

Complying with the new International Health Regulations

Pandemic influenza planning was also discussed at the meeting, in the context of the new International Health Regulations. One recommendation stipulates that, 'PRIPPP should increase awareness and capacity building for complying with the International Health Regulations.'

Follow-up

Technical discussions for both animal and human health representatives were held following the meeting. A summary of the discussions on human health is presented in the bulletin (see article on the 13th meeting of the PPHSN Coordinating Body).

To get the complete list of recommendations from the meeting, visit the PPHSN website at: <http://www.spc.int/phs/PPHSN/Meetings/PRIPPP/PIP-TaskForce2007.htm>

What is PRIPPP?

PRIPPP is a four-year, AUD 10.5 million project funded by AusAID and NZAID that was launched in 2006 within the PPHSN framework. The project is being monitored and implemented by SPC in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). It involves both animal and human health sectors and covers all 22 Pacific Island members of SPC.

In practical terms, PRIPPP can provide support to PICTs in developing and testing preparedness plans, infection control, rapid containment, laboratory capacity, legal issues, national risk communication strategies, and stockpiling essential drugs and materials.