CHAPTER 5.3.

OIE PROCEDURES RELEVANT TO THE AGREEMENT ON THE APPLICATION OF SANITARY AND PHYTOSANITARY MEASURES OF THE WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

Article 5.3.1.

The Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures and role and responsibility of the OIE

The Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) specifically encourages the Members of the World Trade Organization to base their sanitary measures on international standards, guidelines and recommendations, where they exist. Members may choose to implement sanitary measures that exceed more stringent ones to adopt a higher level of protection than provided by those in international standards, texts if these are deemed necessary to protect aquatic animal or human health and are scientifically justified by risk analysis: there is a scientific justification or if the level of protection provided by the relevant international texts is considered to be inappropriate. In such circumstances, Members are subject to obligations relating to risk assessment and to adopt a consistent approach of risk management.

The SPS Agreement encourages Governments to make a wider use of risk analysis: WTO Members shall undertake an assessment as appropriate to the circumstances of the actual risk involved.

To promote transparency, the SPS Agreement, in Article 7, obliges WTO Members to notify changes in, and provide relevant information on, sanitary measures which may, directly or indirectly, affect international trade.

The SPS Agreement recognises the OIE as the relevant international organisation responsible for the development and promotion of international animal health standards, guidelines, and recommendations affecting trade in live aquatic animals and aquatic animal products.

Article 5.3.2.

Introduction on to the judgement determination of the equivalence of sanitary measures

The importation of aquatic animals and aquatic animal products involves a degree of risk to the aquatic animal health status and human health status of in an importing country. The estimation of that risk and the choice of the appropriate risk management option(s) are made more difficult by differences among the aquatic animal health management systems and aquatic animal production and processing systems in Member Countries. However, it is now recognised that significantly different animal health and production systems and measures can provide may achieve equivalent aquatic animal and human health protection for the purposes of international trade, with benefits to both the importing country and the exporting country.

These recommendations in this chapter are intended to assist Member Countries to determine whether sanitary measures arising from different animal health and production systems may provide achieve the same level of aquatic animal and human health protection. They discuss principles which might that may be utilised in a judgement determination of equivalence, and outline a step-wise process for trading partners to follow in facilitating a judgement of equivalence. These provisions are applicable whether equivalence applies at the level of to specific measures, specific commodities or on a systems-wide basis, and whether equivalence applies to specific areas of trade or aquatic animal products, or in general.
Article 5.3.3.

General considerations on the judgement determination of the equivalence of sanitary measures

Before trade in aquatic animals or their products may occur, an importing country must be satisfied assured that its aquatic animal health status and human health in its territory will be appropriately protected. In most cases, the risk management measures adopted will rely in part on judgements made about the aquatic animal health management and aquatic animal production system(s) in the exporting country and the effectiveness of sanitary measures procedures applied undertaken there. Differences may be with respect to infrastructure, policies and/or operating procedures, laboratory systems, approaches to control of the pests and diseases present, border security and internal movement controls.

International recognition of the legitimacy of different approaches to achieving the importing country's appropriate level of protection (ALOP) has led to the principle of equivalence being included in trade agreements, including the SPS Agreement of the WTO.

If trading partners agree that the measures applied achieve the same level of health protection, these measures are considered equivalent. Benefits of applying equivalence may include:

1) minimising costs associated with international trade by tailoring sanitary measures to the local circumstances;
2) maximising aquatic animal health outcomes for a given level of resource input;
3) facilitating trade by achieving the required health protection through less trade restrictive sanitary measures; and
4) decreased reliance on costly commodity testing and isolation procedures in bilateral or multilateral agreements.

The Aquatic Code recognises equivalence by recommending alternative sanitary measures for many diseases. Equivalence may be achieved, for example, by enhanced surveillance and monitoring, by the use of alternative test, treatment or isolation procedures, or by combinations of the above. To facilitate the judgement determination of equivalence, Member Countries should base their sanitary measures on the OIE standards, guidelines and recommendations of the OIE.

It is essential to apply a scientific Member Countries should use risk analysis to the extent practicable in establishing the basis for a judgement determination of equivalence.

Article 5.3.4.

Prerequisite considerations in a judgement for the determination of equivalence

1) Application of risk assessment

Application of the discipline of Risk assessment provides a structured basis for judging equivalence among different sanitary measures as it allows a comparison of the effect of a measure(s) on a particular step(s) in the importation pathway, and the relative effects of proposed alternative measure(s) on the same or related steps.

A judgement determination of equivalence should needs to assess compare the effectiveness of the sanitary measures in terms of its effectiveness against the particular risk or group of risks against which the measure is designed to protect. Such an assessment may include the following elements: the purpose,
of the measure, the level of protection achieved by the measure and the contribution the measure makes to achieving the ALOP of the importing country.
2) **Categorisation of sanitary measures**

Proposals for equivalence may be in terms of a measure comprising a single component of a measure (e.g. an isolation or sampling procedure, a test or treatment requirement, a certification procedure) or multiple components (e.g. a production system for a commodity) of a sanitary measure, or a combination of sanitary measures. Multiple components or combinations of measures **may be applied consecutively or concurrently.**

Sanitary measures are those described in each disease-specific chapter of the Aquatic Code which are used for to manage the risks reduction and are appropriate for particular posed by that disease. **Sanitary measures may be** applied either alone or in combination and include test requirements, processing requirements, inspection or certification procedures, quarantine confinements, and sampling procedures.

For the purposes of judging equivalence, sanitary measures can be broadly categorised as:

a) **infrastructure:** including the legislative base (e.g. aquatic animal health law) and administrative systems (e.g. organisation of Veterinary Services or Aquatic Animal Health Services, national and regional animal health authorities, emergency response organisations);

b) **programme design and implementation:** including documentation of systems, performance and decision criteria, laboratory capability, and provisions for certification, audit and enforcement;

c) **specific technical requirement:** including requirements applicable to the use of secure facilities, treatment (e.g. retorting of cans), specific test (e.g. ELISA) and procedures (e.g. pre-export inspection).

A sanitary measure(s) proposed for a judgement of equivalence may fall into one or more of these categories, which are not mutually exclusive.

In some cases, such as a method for pathogen inactivation, a comparison of specific technical requirements may suffice. In many instances, however, a judgement as to whether the same level of protection is likely will be achieved may only be determined through an evaluation of all relevant components of an exporting country's aquatic animal health management systems and aquatic animal production systems. For example, a judgement of equivalence for a specific sanitary measure at the programme design/implementation level may require a prior examination of infrastructure while a judgement of equivalence for a specific measure at the specific technical requirement level may require that the specific measure be judged in its context through examination of infrastructure and programmes.

**Article 5.3.5.**

**Principles for judgement of equivalence**

In conjunction with the above considerations, judgement of equivalence of sanitary measures should be based on application of the following principles:

1) an importing country has the right to set the level of protection it deems appropriate (the ALOP in relation to human and animal life and health in its territory; this ALOP may be expressed in qualitative or quantitative terms;

2) the importing country should be able to describe the reason for each sanitary measure i.e. the level of protection intended to be achieved by application of the identified measure against a hazard risk;

3) an importing country should recognise that sanitary measures different from the ones it has proposed may be capable of providing the same level of protection, in particular, it should consider the existence of free zones or compartments, and of safe aquatic animal products;

4) the importing country should, upon request, enter into consultations with the exporting country with the aim of facilitating a judgement of equivalence;
5) any sanitary measure or combination of sanitary measures can be proposed for judgement determination of equivalence;
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6) an interactive process should be followed that applies a defined sequence of steps, and utilises an agreed process for exchange of information, so as to limit data collection to that which is necessary, to minimise administrative burden, and to facilitate resolution of claims;

7) the exporting country should be able to demonstrate objectively how the alternative sanitary measure(s), proposed as equivalent will provide the same level of protection;

8) the exporting country should present a submission for equivalence in a form that facilitates judgement determination by the importing country;

9) the importing country should evaluate submissions for equivalence in a timely, consistent, transparent and objective manner, and in accordance with appropriate risk assessment principles;

10) the importing country should take into account any knowledge of and prior experience with the Veterinary Authority or other Competent Authority of the exporting country;

10bis) the importing country should take into account any arrangements it has with other exporting countries on similar issues;

10ter) the importing country may also take into account any knowledge of the exporting country's arrangements with other importing countries;

11) the exporting country should, upon request, provide the importing country access to information access to enable on the procedures or systems which that are the subject of the equivalence judgement determination to be examined and evaluated upon request of the importing country.

12) the importing country should be the sole determinant judge of equivalence, but should provide to the exporting country a full explanation for its judgement;

13) to facilitate a judgement determination of equivalence, Member Countries should base their sanitary measures on relevant OIE standards and guidelines, where these exist. However, they may choose to implement more stringent sanitary measures that exceed OIE standards if these are scientifically justified by a risk analysis;

14) to allow the judgement determination of equivalence to be reassessed if necessary, the importing country and the exporting country should keep each other informed of significant changes to infrastructure, health status or programmes which may bear on the judgement determination of equivalence; and

15) appropriate technical assistance from an importing country, following a request by an exporting developing country, for appropriate technical assistance that would may facilitate the successful completion of a judgement determination of equivalence.

Article 5.3.6.

Sequence of steps to be taken in judgement determination of equivalence

There is no single sequence of steps which that must should be followed in all judgements determinations of equivalence. The steps that trading partners choose will generally depend on the circumstances and their trading experience. Nevertheless, the interactive sequence of steps described below may be useful for assessing any all sanitary measures irrespective of their categorisation as infrastructure, programme design and implementation or specific technical requirement components of an aquatic animal health management system or aquatic animal production system.

This sequence assumes that the importing country is meeting its obligations under the WTO SPS Agreement and has in place a transparent measure based either on an international standard or a risk analysis.
Recommended steps are:

1) the exporting country identifies the measure(s) for which it wishes to propose an alternative measure(s), and requests from the importing country a reason for its sanitary measure in terms of the level of protection intended to be achieved against a hazard(s) risk;

2) the importing country explains the reason for the measure(s), in terms that would facilitate comparison with an alternative sanitary measure(s) and consistent with the principles set out in these provisions;

3) the exporting country demonstrates the case for equivalence of an alternative sanitary measure(s) in a form that facilitates evaluation analysis by an importing country;

4) the exporting country responds to any technical concerns raised by the importing country by providing relevant further information;

5) judgement determination of equivalence by the importing country should takes into account as appropriate:
   a) the impact of biological variability and uncertainty;
   b) the expected effect of the alternative sanitary measure(s) on all relevant hazards;
   c) OIE standards and guidelines;
   d) application of solely qualitative frameworks where it is not possible or reasonable to conduct quantitative the results of a risk assessment;

6) the importing country notifies the exporting country of its judgement and its underlying reasons within a reasonable period of time. The judgement:
   a) recognition recognises of the equivalence of the exporting country’s alternative sanitary measure(s); or
   b) requests for further information; or
   c) rejection rejects of the case for equivalence of the alternative sanitary measure(s);

7) an attempt should be made to resolve any differences of opinion over judgement of a case, either interim or final, by using an agreed mechanism such as to reach consensus (e.g. the OIE informal procedure for dispute mediation), or by referral to an agreed expert [Article 5.3.8.];

8) depending on the category of measures involved, the importing country and the exporting country may informally acknowledge the equivalence or enter into a formal agreement of equivalence agreement giving effect to the judgement or a less formal acknowledgement of the equivalence of a specific measure(s) may suffice.

An importing country recognising the equivalence of an exporting country’s alternative sanitary measure(s) needs to should ensure that it acts consistently with regard to applications from third countries for recognition of equivalence applying to the same or a very similar measure(s). Consistent action does not mean however that a specific measure(s) proposed by several exporting countries should always be judged as equivalent because as a measure(s) should not be considered in isolation but as part of a system of infrastructure, policies and procedures in the context of the aquatic animal health situation in the exporting country.
Article 5.3.7.

Sequence of steps to be taken in establishing a zone—or-compartment and having it recognised for international trade purposes

The terms ‘zone’ and ‘zoning’ in the Aquatic Code have the same meaning as ‘region’, ‘area’ and ‘regionalisation’ in the SPS Agreement of the WTO.

The requirements for establishing a disease-free zone or a compartment declared free of a disease is described in Chapter 4.1, and in each disease-specific chapter Chapter 4.1, and should be considered by trading partners when establishing sanitary measures for trade. The steps that the Veterinary Services or Aquatic Animal Health Services of the importing country and the exporting country choose and implement will generally depend on the circumstances existing within the countries and at their borders, and their trading history. The recommended steps are:

1. For zoning

   a) The exporting country identifies a geographical area within its territory, which, based on surveillance, it considers to contain an aquatic animal subpopulation with a distinct health status with respect to a specific disease-specific diseases based on surveillance.

   b) The exporting country describes in the biosecurity plan for the zone the measures which are being or will be, applied to distinguish such an area epidemiologically from other parts of its territory, in accordance with the recommendations in the Aquatic Code.

   c) Upon request, the exporting country provides to the importing country:

      i) the above information to the importing country, with an explanation of why the area, as described in points a) and b) above, can be treated as an epidemiologically separate zone for international trade purposes;

      ii) access to enable the procedures or systems that establish the zone to be examined and evaluated upon request by the importing country, access to information on the procedures or systems that establish the zone;

   d) The importing country determines whether it accepts such an area as a zone for the importation of aquatic animals and/or aquatic animal products, taking into account:

      i) an evaluation of the exporting country’s Veterinary Services or Aquatic Animal Health Services;

      ii) the result of a risk assessment based on the information provided by the exporting country and its own research;

      iii) its own aquatic animal health situation with respect to the disease(s) concerned; and

      iv) other relevant OIE standards or guidelines.

   e) The importing country notifies the exporting country of its determination judgement and the underlying its reasons, within a reasonable period of time, being:

      i) recognition of the zone; or

      ii) request for further information; or

      iii) rejection of the area as a zone for international trade purposes.
f) An attempt should be made to resolve any differences over recognition of the zone, either in the interim or finally, by using an agreed mechanism to reach consensus such as the OIE informal procedure for dispute mediation (Article 5.3.8).

Annex 6 (contd)

g) The Veterinary Authorities or other Competent Authorities of the importing and exporting countries should enter into a formal agreement recognising the zone.

2. For compartmentalisation

a) Based on discussions with the relevant industry, the exporting country identifies within its territory a compartment comprising an aquatic animal subpopulation contained in one or more establishments or other premises operating under common management practices and related to biosecurity plan. The compartment contains an identifiable aquatic animal subpopulation with a distinct health status with respect to a specific disease(s). The exporting country describes how this status is maintained through a partnership between the relevant industry and the Veterinary Authority or other Competent Authority of the exporting country.

b) The exporting country examines the compartment’s biosecurity plan and confirms through an audit that:

i) the compartment is epidemiologically closed throughout its routine operating procedures as a result of effective implementation of its biosecurity plan; and

ii) the surveillance and monitoring programme in place is appropriate to verify the status of such a subpopulation with respect to such disease(s) in question.

c) The exporting country describes the compartment, in accordance with the recommendations in the Aquatic Code Chapters 4.1. and 4.2.

d) Upon request, the exporting country provides to the importing country:

i) the above information to the importing country, with an explanation of why such a subpopulation, as described in points a) and b) above, can be treated as an epidemiologically separate compartment for international trade purposes; and

ii) access to enable the procedures or systems that establish the compartment to be examined and evaluated upon request by the importing country access to information on the procedures or systems that establish the compartment.

e) The importing country determines whether it accepts such a subpopulation as a compartment for the importation of aquatic animals or aquatic animal products, taking into account:

i) an evaluation of the exporting country’s Veterinary Service or Aquatic Animal Health Services;

ii) the result of a risk assessment based on the information provided by the exporting country and its own research;

iii) its own aquatic animal health situation with respect to the disease(s) concerned; and

iv) other relevant OIE standards or guidelines.

f) The importing country notifies the exporting country of its determination judgement and the underlying its reasons, within a reasonable period of time, being:

i) recognition of the compartment; or

ii) request for further information; or
iii) rejection of such a subpopulation as a compartment for international trade purposes.

g) An attempt should be made to resolve any differences over recognition of the compartment, either in the interim or finally, by using an agreed mechanism to reach consensus such as the OIE informal procedure for dispute mediation (Article 5.3.8.).

h) The Veterinary Authorities or other Competent Authorities of the importing and exporting countries should enter into a formal agreement recognising the compartment.

Annex 6 (contd)

i) The Veterinary Authority or other Competent Authorities of the exporting country should promptly inform importing countries of any occurrence of a disease in respect of which the compartment was defined.

Article 5.3.8.

The OIE informal procedure for dispute mediation

The OIE shall maintain its existing voluntary in-house mechanisms for assisting Member Countries to resolve differences. In-house procedures that will apply are that:

1) Both parties agree to give the OIE a mandate to assist them in resolving their differences.

2) If considered appropriate, the Director General of the OIE recommends an expert, or experts, and a chairman, as requested, agreed by both parties.

3) Both parties agree on the terms of reference and working programme, and to meet all expenses incurred by the OIE.

4) The expert or experts are entitled to seek clarification of any of the information and data provided by either country in the assessment or consultation processes, or to request additional information or data from either country.

5) The expert or experts shall submit a confidential report to the Director General of the OIE, who will then transmit it to both parties.