

FAO Reference Centres

Background: the corporate policy for FAO Reference Centres

Over the course of its history, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has developed relationships with academic and research institutes, laboratories and other establishments to gather guidance, advice and specialized assistance in promoting agricultural issues related to food production, livelihoods, health and nutrition. Between 1957 and 1990, FAO's Animal Health Service (AGAH) established relationships with more than 50 institutions, which were referred to as "FAO reference laboratories and collaborating centres". In recent years, the designation of such centres has undergone an in-depth review, leading to the establishment of a corporate FAO policy in 2006, described in the Director-General's (DG) Bulletin 2006/32 (October 2006) for the designation of FAO Reference Centres. This designation is not bound to individual experts but is institution-based.

"FAO Reference Centres are institutions designated by the Director-General to provide specific, independent technical/scientific advice on issues related to FAO's mandate."

Following release of this new corporate policy, AGAH contacted all its reference laboratories and collaborating centres, informed them about the policy changes and invited them to apply for designation as FAO Reference Centres. Most institutes accepted this invitation and submitted applications. AGAH has also reviewed the technical areas covered by the former reference laboratories and collaborating centres and has identified missing technical and geographical areas. Gaps identified include expertise in risk analysis, wildlife, veterinary public health and laboratory biosafety, to provide policy advice, updated methodologies, goods and services to FAO members. As a result, AGAH is expanding the range of expertise in animal health provided by its Reference Centres, and the designation of new Reference Centres is an ongoing and dynamic process.

Reference Centres are expected to contribute to FAO strategic objectives and animal health activities by providing assistance in: i) preventing and detecting transboundary animal diseases, including zoonoses, and improving risk and disease management; ii) enhancing the understanding and analysis of factors that contribute to disease emergence, maintenance and spread; iii) supporting safer animal production, as part of economic development, food security, food safety and poverty alleviation efforts; iv) improving veterinary public health services; and v) guiding policies related to animal health.

Technical areas covered by FAO Reference Centres in animal health

AGAH has identified 18 technical areas for which Reference Centres are currently required (Table 1). Other areas will be identified as needs arise.

**Table 1: Technical areas covered by Reference Centres**

Specific diseases or groups of diseases:	Thematic areas:
Animal influenza and Newcastle disease	Veterinary epidemiology
Foot-and-mouth disease	Laboratory biosafety and biocontainment
Morbillivirus diseases	Vaccine quality control
Ruminant mycoplasma diseases	Wildlife health
Vector-borne diseases	Veterinary public health
Livestock parasitic diseases	Diseases at the human–animal interface
Brucellosis	
Tuberculosis and paratuberculosis	
African and classical swine fever	
Rabies	
Parasitic zoonotic diseases	
Viral zoonotic diseases	

Steps for the designation of a FAO Reference Centre

As outlined in the DG Bulletin, elaborated by AGAH and based on the corporate policy, the steps for designation as a FAO Reference Centre are:

- The institution submits an application and declaration of interest to AGAH.¹
- The FAO technical unit (AGAH) evaluates the application, including the declaration of possible conflicts of interest.
- AGAH and the institution agree on a work plan.
- AGAH submits recommendations to higher FAO management for approval in principle.
- FAO consults government authorities in the country of the applying institution.
- The designation letter is drafted and shared with the applicant.
- On receipt of all clearance the final designation letter is sent to the institution for signature.

Areas of collaboration, the institution's mandate, annual reporting, and terms of use for the FAO logo are described in the designation letter, which is valid for four years.

Evaluation of applications

Technical panels are set up to evaluate applications against the main criteria laid down in DG Bulletin 2006/32:

- Ability to carry out one or several of the following functions:
 - standardization of technology, therapeutic and other substances, and methods/procedures;
 - provision of reference substances and services such as quality assurance;
 - participation in collaborative research of a scientific, technical or policy nature;
 - contribution to capacity development through the provision of training;
 - coordination of activities carried out by other institutions;
 - provision of information and advice of a scientific, technical and policy nature.
- Active engagement in fields of expertise relevant to the work of FAO, and contribution to the implementation of FAO's programme priorities and to strengthening capacities in countries and regions.

¹ At e-mail AGAH-Reference-Centre@fao.org.

- Prior successful collaboration with FAO for a minimum of two years (or less under special circumstances, to be justified and demonstrated by the relevant technical unit) in carrying out jointly planned activities.
- Submission of a declaration of interest.

Designation status

As at March 2012, seven institutions have been officially designated as FAO Reference Centres:

- For animal influenza and Newcastle disease:
 - Australian Animal Health Laboratory (AAHL), Australia;
 - *Friedrich Loeffler Institut* (FLI), Germany;
 - *Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie* (IZSVE), Italy.
- For foot-and-mouth (FMD) disease and vesicular diseases:
 - Project Directorate on Foot-and-Mouth Disease (PDFMD), Indian Centre for Agricultural Research (ICAR), India: FMD for South Asia;
 - *Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale della Lombardia e dell'Emilia Romagna* (IZSLER), Italy: FMD and swine vesicular diseases;
 - National Veterinary Services Laboratories Foreign Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory (NVSL-FADDL), United States of America: FMD and other vesicular diseases in the Americas and the Caribbean;
 - Veterinary and Agrochemical Research Centre (CODA-CERVA-VAR), Belgium: vesicular diseases.

About 45 other applications are currently at various stages of the designation process. The designations of institutions for FMD, animal influenza, parasitology, wildlife, vector-borne diseases and veterinary epidemiology are in the final stages. Several are awaiting government endorsement, where delays are not necessarily related to government reluctance to provide endorsement but rather to cumbersome official communication channels. The designations of Reference Centres for morbilliviruses, ruminant mycoplasmoses, rabies, veterinary public health, brucellosis, African and classical swine fever, parasitic zoonoses, diseases at the animal-human interface, tuberculosis and paratuberculosis are undergoing internal FAO approval in principle. Applications from institutions interested in becoming FAO Reference Centres for laboratory biosafety and biocontainment are under evaluation.

In the event of an application not meeting the criteria (e.g., lack of a leading scientific role, inadequate biocontainment level and/or level of collaboration with the developing world), FAO invites the institution to reapply when its situation changes.

Information on FAO Reference Centres will be made publicly available on the Animal Production and Health Division (AGA) Web site² and on the Emergency Prevention System for Transboundary Animal and Plant Pests and Diseases Global Animal Disease Information System (EMPRES-i) directory of laboratories.³

For further information please contact AGAH-Reference-Centre@fao.org.

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² www.fao.org/ag/againfo/home/en/index.htm

³ <http://empres-i.fao.org/eipws3g/#h=3>