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**COVID-19 pandemic: the EU Biodiversity and Farm to Fork Strategies must set a new course to fight zoonotic diseases from wildlife trade and consumption and intensive livestock farming**

On 23 April, the EP Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals held a video conference on zoonotic diseases that originate from wildlife trade and consumption or from intensive livestock farming. Several outstanding academic experts contributed to the debate. The members of the Intergroup would like to inform you about the meeting's main conclusions and call on your support to take future action.

The meeting's discussion on zoonotic diseases and the trade and consumption of wildlife clearly indicated that the currently poorly regulated trade in wild animals may have serious consequences which can no longer be ignored. COVID-19 is not the first disease transmitted to people from animals, and it surely will not be the last. In fact, experts have stated that an estimated 600,000 - 800,000 unknown viral species capable of infecting humans lurk in wildlife.

The European Commission should take the lead in preventing future pandemics by introducing stronger measures to fight illegal wildlife trade, by pushing for a global ban on so-called wet markets and bush meat imports, and by protecting natural habitats.

Not only the illegal wildlife trade plays an important role in spreading pathogens, but risks also exist from the legal trade. The EU is a main destination for live wild animals, including primates, birds, and reptiles, with thousands of wild animal species that are allowed to be kept as pets. In recent years, the potential for the transmission of zoonotic diseases in the EU has grown significantly due to a growing trend for exotic pet keeping. This includes an increasing range of species on sale that are caught in the wild elsewhere around the globe, and the commercial trade in captive-bred wild animals, with the subsequent worldwide movement of wild animals for which the health status is unknown.

The newly published EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 highlights that reinforced regulation of the wildlife trade is crucial to both prevent and build resilience to future outbreaks of zoonotic diseases. However, a clear commitment to take further policy actions is missing. To prevent risks to people's health and biodiversity and ensure that the Strategy is implemented effectively, the Members of the Intergroup request the Commission to consider strictly regulating the legal wildlife trade.

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Established in 1983

An EU-wide 'Positive List' stating which animal species are suitable and safe to be kept as pets needs to be adopted to effectively regulate the trade in live wild animals in the EU, thereby protecting the health of EU consumers as well as the welfare of the animals and the global biodiversity. In addition, an EU Positive List would be coherent with the "Do no harm" principle promoted in the Strategy.

On the other hand, and not less importantly, it is clear that protecting public health also requires a different approach to animal farming. Pigs and poultry, which are the most widely farmed species in the EU, are also reservoirs and mixing vessels of influenza viruses that can infect humans. For instance, the 2009 swine influenza pandemic cost hundreds of thousands of human lives. Besides viruses, there is no denying that industrial animal agriculture in general is a powerful incubator of diseases. Several bacteria hosted by farmed animals, such as *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella* and *E. coli*, are amongst the main causes of foodborne zoonotic illness in humans, with almost 350,000 confirmed cases in the EU in 2018 attributable to these three pathogens alone.

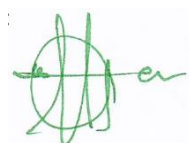
On a global scale, livestock farming is also the industry most responsible for the massive use of antimicrobials, which are released into soils and waterways and are one of the root causes of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). According to the World Health Organisation, AMR represents "one of the biggest threats to global health, food security, and development today".

Considering these challenges, the European Union should set a totally new model in the years to come. In this respect, we welcome the objective to reduce the sale of antimicrobials for livestock farming and aquaculture by 50% by 2030. We are also very supportive of the explicit reference in the EU Farm to Fork Strategy to the importance of promoting plant-based diets. In order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the livestock sector, the Strategy refers to the use of adapted animal feed and to the production of biogas. We think that this is not a real solution to the underlying problem: we need to reduce the number of animals farmed. Food chains should become more resilient, local, and nature-inclusive. Only in this way will the EU create long-lasting value for farmers and consumers alike, while also protecting animal welfare and public health. We hope that the planned proposal for a legislative framework for sustainable food systems will provide the instruments of such systemic change.

The COVID-19 crisis is the latest reminder that humans need to undergo an entire change of attitude, becoming less anthropocentric and more ecocentric. The EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 and the Farm to Fork Strategy offer a unique opportunity to set a brand-new course, and this should be seized. We have great expectations that the two Strategies will contribute to speed up the process for a fundamental change by facilitating new legislative acts and policies, as well as the revision of what is outdated in the acquis.

Thank you in advance for your reply and for taking the concerns of the Animal Welfare Intergroup into consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Anja Hazekamp MEP

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## Annex:

**Prof Herwig Leirs** from the Evolutionary Ecology Group at the University of Antwerp spoke about zoonoses, their origin and how they are transmitted to humans.

**Prof Peter Li**, Associate Professor at the University of Houston-Downtown, described the role of wet markets in Chinese society, explaining that the presence of wildlife in such markets is a relatively new phenomenon in China. There is evidence that just 3.3% of people consume meat from wildlife and even then 'only rarely'. However, he stressed that this business is inhumane and a threat to human health.

**Prof Dr Frank Pasmans** from Ghent University reported about a fungal disease that is mortally threatening the survival of 500 species of amphibians worldwide and which stemmed from the trade in exotic pets.

The second half of the meeting focused on zoonotic diseases specifically originating from intensive livestock farming.

**Prof Roel Coutinho** from the University of Amsterdam described the outbreak of Q fever from goat farms in the Netherlands in the early 2000s. The number of goats farmed in the country leapt from 7415 in the 1980s to 350,000 in 2007. This high density of goats acted as a reservoir for the spreading of the disease, which was also transmitted to humans living near the farms. Prof Thijs Kuiken of the Erasmus University Medical Center pointed out that outbreaks of diseases such as COVID-19 or SARS have increased in the last 30 years because of three factors: more animals being farmed, increased trade and transport of animals, and human movement into uninhabited regions. Standard measures to tackle the issue currently include improved surveillance and diagnostics on farms but to stop future outbreaks the underlying causes need to be addressed. Goals for conserving and sustainably using nature cannot be met by current trajectories. They may only be achieved through transformative changes: a fundamental, system-wide reorganisation.

**Philip Elders**, Youth Delegate of the World Health Organisation for the Netherlands expressed disappointment that humanity had done nothing to prevent the COVID-19 crisis before it happened, despite ample warning, and, like Kuiken, stressed the importance of taking a planetary approach to the problem.