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European Commission

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HEALTH AND ANIMAL WELFARE

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Brussels, 6 October, 2025

Dear Minister,

Further to my letter of 2 September 2025 on the unfavourable epidemiological situation regarding sheep pox and goat pox (SGP) in Greece and our meeting of 23 September 2025 – and in response to your letter of 24 September – I would like to bring to your attention the following information regarding the use of vaccination as control measure against this disease.

In accordance with EU legislation, every time SGP is confirmed in an establishment a set of mandatory control measures[1] must be implemented without delay, namely stamping-out, movement restrictions, surveillance, biosecurity, and establishment of restricted zones. Although these measures, if properly implemented, are deemed to be effective in most epidemiological conditions, vaccination against SGP, in accordance with EU rules[2], is a necessary supplementary measure in the current situation in Greece.

There is compelling evidence that the measures that have been applied in Greece for more than one year now are not sufficient to stop the disease from spreading – nor to reduce the number of animals that must be culled due to SGP. The SGP epidemic in Greece has persisted uninterruptedly for more than a year now, with the number of new outbreaks rising since August 2024. More than 285.000 sheep and goats have been culled in more than 1.100 outbreaks and with more than 400 new outbreaks in the past two months (see Annex I). Furthermore, SGP continues to spread to the "free areas" of the country with three new regional units affected recently.

In view of the above, vaccination is the only additional measure that can stop the occurrence of new outbreaks of SGP, limit further spread to the rest of Greece and reduce the number of animals to be killed. Vaccination with an effective vaccine, ensuring sufficient vaccine coverage and high levels of immunity in sufficiently large vaccination zones will cease virus circulation and occurrence of new outbreaks.

Konstantinos Tsiaras
Minister of Rural Development and Food
Hellenic Republic

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1 Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/687 of 17 December 2019 supplementing Regulation (EU) 2016/429 of the European Parliament and the Council, as regards rules for the prevention and control of certain listed diseases (OJ L 174, 3.6.2020, p. 64, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2020/687/oj)

2 Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2023/361 of 28 November 2022 supplementing Regulation (EU) 2016/429 of the European Parliament and the Council as regards rules for the use of certain veterinary medicinal products for the purpose of prevention and control of certain listed diseases (OJ L 52, 20.2.2023, pp. 1–42) ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2023/361/oj

[redacted]

Experience, science and veterinary expertise further support the need to revert to vaccination in Greece now.

As regards field experience, the last vaccination against SGP in Greece was in 1987-1988 with successful results leading to the termination of the use of SGP vaccines in 1992[3]. Consequently, in order to enhance preparedness against SGP, a comprehensive review of the currently available SGP vaccines was produced by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in 2014[4], further confirming the availability and suitability of vaccination under certain circumstances. Large-scale field trials were not launched as the EFSA 2014 Scientific Opinion provides solid scientific evidence in this field.

In view of the experience and science available, the EU established and maintains a SGP vaccine bank that currently holds the Jovivac[5] vaccine (RM65 strain), produced by Jovac (300.000 doses in physical stock, order for another 1,7 million doses in progress). A new public procurement procedure is also in progress for an additional 4.000.000 doses of SGP vaccines based on the Bakırköy strain, as an alternative choice in the near future[6]. Shipments of vaccines from the EU SGP vaccine bank are completely free of charge and can be effectively delivered within a few working days from the request.

Existing batches of vaccines in the EU vaccine bank were subject to some additional quality laboratory testing at the EU Reference Laboratory (EURL) for Capripox viruses to further reassure compliance with standards such as vaccine virus identity, vaccine efficacy, absence of extraneous agents etc. In addition, the EURL has conducted in vivo studies, where vaccines in the EU vaccine bank and other vaccines as well were inoculated to sheep, in order to ascertain the effectiveness and possible side effects following vaccination. Copies of the relevant reports and scientific evidence have already been transmitted by my services to the veterinary competent authorities of Greece, along with a full package of additional information provided by the EURL. Of course, the EURL is available to provide further scientific support if Greece needs so.

Moreover, the expert mission of the EU Emergency Veterinary Team (EUVET)[7] in May 2025 explicitly and strongly recommended vaccination after extensive consideration of all relevant factors related to the constant presence of the disease since 2023 and significant shortcomings identified. These concern for instance the limited number of official veterinarians involved in the SGP control, the identified gaps in biosecurity, the possible underreporting of disease suspicion, the late detection of the disease, the possible illegal movement of animals, unclear evidence for the way of spreading in the territory, and the relatively easy spread in newly affected areas.

Let me also remind that in view of the accelerated deterioration of the SGP situation in Greece, not seen recently in any other Member State facing SGP, shipments of small ruminants to other countries are currently prohibited from the entire territory of Greece until 31 December 2025. In case vaccination, reaching the necessary level of vaccine coverage, is not quickly deployed and the epidemic situation is not drastically improved

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3 Rev. sci. tech. Off. int. Epiz., 2008, 27 (3), 899-905

4 https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.2903/j.efsa.2014.3885

5 https://www.jovaccenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Jovivac-En-Leaflet.pdf

6 https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/tender-details/764d44e8-3c00-4d96-9433-27ee8eef2235-CN)

7 https://food.ec.europa.eu/document/download/feb626db-6599-425e-b908-79cf7e3d01ce_en?filename=reg-com_ahw_20250521_pres-09.pdf

the Commission will need to prolong this prohibition, and also extend its range to include more products of animal origin presenting specific risks (i.e. raw skins, untreated wool and dairy products) in order to protect the rest of the EU from possible disease incursions.

I would like to emphasize also that, should Greece not handle properly the situation, it is the obligation of the Commission to ensure that all relevant measures are in place, to protect other Member States and to protect the financial interests of the Union.

I would also like to ensure that the Commission will explore all available instruments in order to provide financial and technical support to Greece, beyond the supply of the vaccine doses, to facilitate the implementation of a successful vaccination campaign.

I look forward to receiving feedback from you and I urge Greece reconsidering the expressed position refusing SGP vaccination.

Yours sincerely,

Olivér Várhelyi

Annex