



News Release

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Merial's Canarypox Vaccine is the Choice for Outbreak West Nile virus in Morocco – From Request to Vaccination in 10 Days Across Three Continents

Duluth, GA. – February 17, 2011 – It has been 25 years since scientists took the first steps towards realizing the potential of poxviruses for the benefit of animal health. The re-emergence of West Nile virus (WNV) in horses in Morocco in the summer of 2010 is just the latest example of how Merial's canarypox-vectored vaccines are in demand when outbreaks threaten.

Following the start of the Moroccan WNV outbreak in July 2010, Professor Juergen Richt, Director of the DHS Center of Excellence for Emerging and Zoonotic Animal Diseases (CEEZAD) in Kansas, was asked by the Moroccan veterinarian authorities to advise them on vaccine options. "When I was approached as the Director of CEEZAD to help the Moroccan authorities to obtain an emergency West Nile Virus vaccine," he said. "I could only recommend two licensed vector-based WNV vaccines; one of them was the RECOMBITEK® rWNV vaccine from Merial. I was very happy to learn that Merial was able to supply the product without red tape to help the Moroccan authorities save their valuable horses."

"Merial was pleased to be able to respond so quickly to a serious disease outbreak that potentially threatened the horse population in Morocco," said Frank Hurtig, DVM, MS, Director of Merial's Large Animal Veterinary Services. "Utilized in the United States since 2004, RECOMBITEK rWNV has been a valuable tool as an aid in the prevention of disease, viremia and encephalitis caused by WNV.² Its use in Morocco further demonstrates its value in protecting horses from the ravages of a potentially deadly disease."

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In addition, RECOMBITEK is the only vaccine currently on the market that provides advanced technology to help prevent WNV.² “Some of today’s vaccines use technology that targets the parts of a virus needed to stimulate both a humoral and cell-mediated antibody response in horses, while other vaccines only stimulate humoral immunity,” says Dr. Hurtig. “RECOMBITEK Brand Equine Vaccines use recombinant canarypox-vectored vaccine technology to stimulate both sides of the immune system that helps protect horses against WNV.”

Merial gained registration for its recombinant canarypox WNV vaccine, RECOMBITEK® rWNV, in the United States seven years ago. However, getting access to Merial’s U.S. stocks and shipping to Morocco might have been delayed while the necessary international regulatory permissions were obtained. In fact, with Merial teams in Lyon and the United States also getting involved, it took only 10 days. MCI Santé Animale, Merial’s Moroccan distributor, submitted an urgent vaccine request on Monday, August 23 – and the 5,000 dose shipment of RECOMBITEK rWNV arrived at Rabat via Air France on September 1. At-risk horses in state premises, including royal stallions, were being vaccinated soon after and they have now received the second of the two vaccination series.

Merial Head of Global Equine, Silke Birlenbach, said, “When the call came from Morocco to help deal with their West Nile Virus outbreak, we pulled out the stops and got on with it. Merial and its canarypox technology have proven their value to the equine world several times over. Already Morocco has ordered an additional 5,000 doses of RECOMBITEK rWNV to protect horses in the future.”

West Nile virus in Europe and the Mediterranean region is not a new phenomenon. It has been encountered for some 50 years, most often in the Mediterranean basin. “WNV infection can be very unpleasant, indeed fatal, for horses and humans alike. Recent outbreaks, in Austria, Greece, Hungary and Italy, as well as Morocco and most recently Portugal, lend support to the impression that it is becoming more common and more virulent,” says Dr. Jules Minke, Head of Research Projects Biologicals. “So WNV remains very much on the Merial R&D radar screen.”

Merial has been called on before to assist in the face of a disease outbreak. When equine influenza emerged in Australia in 2007, another canarypox-vectored vaccine, which is approved for use in the EU, was used to control and eradicate that virus there.

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The success of vaccinia in eradicating smallpox opened the way for the development of poxviruses as recombinant vector vaccines. On July 29, 1986, just six years after the WHO declared the world smallpox free, Enzo Paoletti and Dennis Panicali of the New York Department of Health were granted a patent for a Modified Vaccinia Virus¹. While Paoletti and Panicali were concerned with human health, independently Merial, under Michel Riviere, had also been looking at poxviruses for veterinary purposes. A joint venture named Virogenetics was formed – a rare alliance between a U.S. government body and a foreign company (Merial's French predecessor, Rhône Merieux).

Merial's first poxvirus product was RABORAL V-RG[®], a rabies vaccine for wildlife based on vaccinia. Attention soon moved to avipoxes in general and canarypox in particular. Canarypox as a vector (i.e. the means by which a gene coding for a protective antigen can be transported into the host) leads to excellent vaccines. They can work with or without adjuvants (materials to boost performance) and can accommodate a number of antigens from a wide array of disease-causing agents. Thus, the platform is highly flexible.

Today Merial has canarypox vaccines for horses, cats, dogs and ferrets. As well as West Nile virus, diseases addressed include feline leukemia and rabies, canine distemper and equine influenza. More than 200 million vaccine doses based on this technical platform have been manufactured by Merial in France and the United States, and have been registered around the world. And the work to add more products continues. For example, Merial has been working with South African and American experts³ to investigate the potential value of the canarypox platform against African Horse Sickness.

About Merial

Merial is a world-leading, innovation-driven animal health company, providing a comprehensive range of products to enhance the health, well-being and performance of a wide range of animals. Merial employs approximately 5,700 people and operates in more than 150 countries worldwide. Its 2009 sales were \$2.6 billion. Merial is the Animal Health subsidiary of sanofi-aventis. For more information, please see www.merial.com.

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¹ US Patent 4,603,112 July 29, 1986.

² RECOMBITEK rWNV product label.

³ Guthrie et al. Protective immunization of horses with a recombinant canarypox virus vectored vaccine co-expressing genes encoding the outer capsid proteins of African horse sickness virus. *Vaccine*. 2009;27(33):4434-4438.
