

Report of the joint meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCOFCAH) *Animal Health and Welfare* / DG ENV - ORNIS Committee / SWG

Overview of avian influenza and wild birds

Brussels, Centre Borschette, 1 December 2006

Context for meeting

The series of confirmed cases of the Asian strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI H5N1) in 13 Member States earlier in 2006 clearly demonstrated that migratory birds are playing a role in the spread of this disease. Any effective response to avian influenza requires a multi-disciplinary approach that includes ornithological expertise. This meeting brought together for the first time the two principal committees dealing with avian influenza from the animal health/safety and ornithological/bird conservation. The focus was on wild birds and avian influenza, especially in an EU context to:

- review progress in dealing with this threat,
- take stock of what has been learned and
- highlight the perspective for further action on this subject and
- help ensure effective collaboration for a multidisciplinary approach to this problem.

This was a fast evolving and very challenging issue for the Commission and Member States, especially over the past 15 months. It has represented a significant concern in relation to animal and human health. It is also a concern in relation to ecology and nature conservation, especially in context of the Birds Directive. It was therefore considered timely to review the experiences of last winter and draw lessons from what we have learned in relation to dealing with H5N1 in Europe in the future.

Participants

Representatives from all 25 EU Member States plus Romania, Bulgaria and Norway attended. Important international bodies like FAO, CMS-AEWA, OIE, ECDC, EFSA, and different NGOs like EURING, Wetlands int., BirdLife and FACE took part

Issues Presented/Discussed

1. Results of surveillance for avian influenza in wild birds 2005/06

The first results emerging from analysis of the surveillance data on wild birds were presented by the Community Reference Laboratory (CRL) in Weybridge, UK. Data has been received for most MS & the analysis is based on that of 17 MS (see **copy of presentation by Alasdair Cook of CRL under http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dyna/influenza/index.cfm**).

A first overview of the preliminary results on the surveillance work on AI in wild birds and poultry for 2005/2006 showed that more than 58000 birds of 369 species were tested, with 63 species confirmed as AI positive.

Further work is needed to refine this data set. Some of the species listed are not European species and the data needs to be filtered to exclude these. There are also differences in sampling system for the different species (sampling numbers and geographical distribution) which need to be taken into account in relation to interpretation of this data.

It was highlighted that outbreaks did not occur in all Member States and sampling (particularly of dead birds) was largely linked to outbreak areas (protection zones), which may justify a more refined analysis of affected countries. All cases of detection of the HPAI H5N1 had been from sampling of sick and dead birds.

Not all affected species occur in each Member State. Whereas the Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* has proven to be a useful indicator of outbreaks it was agreed that this species may not necessarily be the most affected by the virus. Experience in Poland among captive Mute Swans suggested a low rate of transmissibility of the virus between them.

It was recognized that the sampling has not been considered in the context of populations of different species of wild birds, and whether this might give insights into the prevalence of the virus. However, the feasibility of doing this was questioned at population levels and it may be more useful to consider this in the context of local situations where outbreaks occur.

Virology results were also presented by Dr. Ian Brown of CRL (see **copy of his presentation under http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dyna/influenza/index.cfm**). These showed the evolution of the virus in time and similarities between different positive cases which provide insights into linkages and possible vectors. These patterns suggest that the HPAI H5N1 may have been in the Baltic Sea at very low levels months before it was detected. There has been higher variability of viral strains detected in poultry, including in outbreaks within EU. The analysis suggests that the virus can spread in both directions between wild birds and poultry. The key question that cannot yet be answered is whether the virus is endemic in wild birds in Europe.

It was agreed that there was a need for further improvements in quality of the data set and that the Commission would work closely with the CRL in relation to further examination of the data.

2. Short overview on results for surveillance for avian influenza in poultry in 2005

The Commission informed delegates about the extensive surveillance of poultry holdings for Avian Influenza, including the results for 2005. This demonstrated that a

strategy is in place to look at other possible sources of spread of the virus other than wild birds¹. There was no major discussion on this item.

3. Surveillance guidelines and approval of Member States' surveillance plans for 2007

The Commission explained the current surveillance and reporting system in the EU. This has evolved in light of experience in dealing with the issue over the past few years. Earlier problems have been recognized and taken into account in relation to planning for 2007 surveillance at meeting of SCFCAH working group in May. The 2007 reporting format and guidelines aim to ensure better quality information on bird species. In the light of the findings in wild birds the guidelines have been adapted in particular for wild bird sampling and testing, emphasizing the collection of tracheal/oropharyngeal and dead bird investigations in higher risk species. The new legal basis for the Community co-financing of Member States' surveillance was explained. (see copy of presentation under http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dyna/influenza/index.cfm)

4. Measures in relation to outbreaks of HPAI H5N1 in wild birds and other biosecurity measures

The Commission made a presentation summarizing the measures that have been taken in response to cases of HPAI H5N1 detected in wild birds in the EU. Intensified surveillance, notification of disease and mortality in wild birds, early detection systems and biosecurity measures applied in poultry holdings aimed at reducing the risk of introduction of infection into poultry farms. Certain movements of live poultry and poultry products from holdings in established zones around such findings have been restricted or only authorized after a positive outcome of a risk assessment. Member States had to identify on their territory areas at higher risk for the introduction of avian influenza infection. Factors to consider were the location of poultry holdings along migratory flyways of birds proceeding from areas where the disease has occurred either in poultry or wild birds; the proximity to wetlands, a high density of poultry and free range systems. In such areas the poultry is to be either confined or otherwise protected against contact with wild birds (fencing, netting, watering/feeding inside). Gathering of captive birds and poultry as well as the use of decoy birds for hunting was prohibited in such areas. Subsequently in view of the surveillance activities performed by hunters and under the condition that the national authorities carry out a risk assessment and control the registration, reporting and the application of stringent biosecurity measures the use of decoy birds was again permitted. (see copy of presentation under http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dyna/influenza/index.cfm)

¹ The issue of trade in wild birds was not covered by the meeting but systems are also in place to minimize this risk, including temporary ban on importations.

These measures have proven to be effective in containing outbreaks of AI within the EU, especially in relation to its spread between wild birds and poultry as well as between poultry farms.

Experiences at Member State level were presented by Professor Willeberg of the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration (**see copy of his presentation under http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dyna/influenza/index.cfm**). The occurrence of HPAI H5N1 had only been detected in areas on the east coast of Denmark. Reported cases were during the period from March to May 2006. Such occurrences appeared to be correlated to higher mortality rates in wild birds at this time. However, the level of mortality of wild birds was low. The first case of transmission between poultry and wild birds (involving Magpie *Pica pica*) was recorded during this period. The fact that no further cases were recorded after May 2006 suggests a die out of the HPAI H5N1 very quickly after arriving in Denmark and it not reach other areas.

The role played by the cold weather that affected much of Europe in early 2006 was mentioned as a possible factor contributing to the outbreaks and spread of affected birds during this period.

5. Scientific studies and reviews that have been conducted & future studies and work planned

It is essential to have best available ornithological knowledge to underpin the strategy to deal with AI, especially in relation to migratory waterbirds. In this context DG ENV arranged for a preliminary evaluation by key scientific bodies (Wetlands International/EURING) of relevant ornithological data. The outcome of the DG ENV preliminary study – including identification of higher risk species was summarized by Wetlands International ([presentation 1/Ward Hagemeyer](#)).

Ornithological information must not be seen in isolation but forms part of a broader multidisciplinary risk assessment in relation to migratory wild birds and AI. EFSA was requested to carry out a risk assessment on this subject. The conclusions of the broader EFSA study and recommendations were presented by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) (**see copy of presentation by Oriol Ribo under http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/dyna/influenza/index.cfm**).

DG Environment outlined plans for a next phase study in relation to AI and wild birds. Apart from a review and expansion of the preliminary analyses on higher risk species in light of the outbreaks last winter, a more detailed analysis of potential higher risk "sentinel" species will be undertaken as well as identification of 'bridge species' that present a higher risk of spread of H5N1 between wild bird birds and poultry and/or humans. It is intended to make information from this study available for the public via a web based application.

Finally reference was made to a project under consideration for funding by DG RTD. This project, titled NEW FLUBIRD aims to provide an early warning system in relation to avian influenza and wild birds.

6. The international and NGO stakeholder perspective

There are clear links between the EU and other regions in relation to the migration of birds which has given rise to concerns about migratory birds transmitting the disease between Asia/Africa where H5N1 appears to be more established and the EU which has not had outbreaks since the summer.

The International dimension and the current situation on AI H5N1 were described by representatives from Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). Both organizations emphasized the need to eradicate the avian influenza virus at the poultry source, a problem that was compounded by a lack of veterinarians in poorer regions of the world. There was also a need to have a better handle on trade, increased biosecurity measures and improved surveillance, measures that have been put in place in EU. The issue of the need for involvement of ornithologists in the inspection work of FAO was underlined. The FAO informed about a new global avian influenza network for surveillance called GAINS (see web site www.gains.org).

There was an exchange of views in relation to the risk of a westward spread of HPAI H5N1 from Asia to Europe again this winter. FAO's examination of the data suggests that the westward spread still exists but at a lower level as it currently had not extended west of Russia/Kazakhstan border.

The perspective of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) was presented. A special scientific task force has been established involving these and other key ornithological expert and conservation bodies to provide scientific advice on this subject. The view of this forum is that any culling of wild birds in response to outbreaks or as a precautionary measure to deal with avian influenza is not justifiable ([presentation 2/Marco Barbieri of CMS](#)). A new web site is being established to share information on this subject (<http://www.AIWEB.info/>)

The Federation of Associations for Hunting & Conservation of the EU (FACE) outlined their position on the subject. This is a subject of vital interest to European hunter, who have an important role to play in the detection of avian influenza and in promoting awareness about it ([presentation 3/Yves Lecocq of FACE](#)).

The representative of BirdLife International emphasized the critical importance of this subject to the international conservation NGOs and the need for a strong science based approach. Responding to this new threat is incurring significant new costs for them. There has also been a need to address misinformation and avoid 'ornithophobia'. Fear of the spread of AI had resulted in persecution of wild birds in Europe which needed to be avoided. ([presentation 4/Martin Fowlie of RSPB](#))

7. Communicating on avian influenza and the role of wild birds (1615-1700 hrs)

There has been a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation in relation to avian influenza and wild birds over the past year, including reporting by the media. This has led to public fears and a risk of overreaction to the situation. There is a need for a science-based approach that is understandable to the public in communicating AI. The experience in trying to do this was considered with a view to drawing lessons from it for the future

The avian influenza task force of CMS share their experience in relation to communication on AI. As part of their communication strategy a brochure on avian influenza and wild birds had been prepared (http://www.cms.int/avianflu/cms_ai_brochure_oct06.pdf http://www.aiweb.info/resources/ai_brochure.pdf).

The experience of a national conservation NGO in dealing with this subject was presented by BirdWatch Ireland ([presentation 5/Niall Hatch](#)). The need to share information was emphasized. It was essential to distinguish facts from opinion and avoid 'spin'. Through objective communication the public would have confidence in the message being given

The Commission highlight its concerns in relation to accurate and clear communication on this subject.

The Commission representative stressed that the impact of the disease on the European Union has been limited due to awareness, intensive surveillance and swift control measures. One sided accusations to put the blame either on the poultry farming and trade or on wild birds should be avoided. The common enemy to fight is the avian influenza virus. EU control strategies which are based on risk assessment should therefore be supported and accurate and clear information should be given on this subject. In this respect also NGO's were asked to support biosecurity measures in Member States.