1. Update information in relation to the avian influenza situation

The German delegation provided update information by distributing “Current situation of avian influenza in the Federal Republic of Germany”. Up till now 112 cases were found on the island Rügen and a total of 128 cases have been detected in Germany. The affected Länder are Baden-Württemberg, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein. Moreover, on 28 February 2 cases were detected in Bavaria. A wild duck was found dead in Bad Tölz and a swan was found dead in Landsberg am Lech. A third suspect case has been detected in Bavaria close to Bodensee.

Furthermore, the German delegate explained that the origin of the infection has not yet been identified on the island of Rügen. In light of the outbreaks, preventive measures for poultry holdings located on the island of Rügen were increased and holdings are subject to a monitoring programme.

The German delegate also informed of the finding of the H5N1 virus in a cat on the island of Rügen. The German delegate stated that the national crisis unit has decided that cats should be kept indoors in the 3 km protection zone and dogs should be kept at a leash. The Commission stressed that Member States should take harmonised measures and agreed on a common recommendation with. See the statement below

The French delegation gave an update on the avian influenza situation and distributed “Point de situation influenza aviaire en France au 28 février 2006”. On 23 February an outbreak occurred in a holding with 11,700 turkeys. The holding is located in the commune of Versailleux, in the département of Ain. No ingoing and outgoing animal movements were recorded from this holding. Following the finding of 200 dead animals on 23 February, all animals in this holding were immediately culled. Zones A and B and a buffer zone have been set up around the farm according to Decision 2006/135/EC. The samples taken from the animals were urgently sent to the National Reference Laboratory which confirmed the presence of the H5N1 virus on 25 February. The French delegation stated that an epidemiological survey is on the way in the affected farm. The French delegate also informed about the latest cases of H5N1 detected in wild birds.
Vaccination of geese and ducks has been launched in the département Landes according to Decision 2006/148/EC. The first vaccination campaign was launched on 27 February with 2,000 ducks being vaccinated. 600,000 animals should be vaccinated within the next weeks.

At the end of the meeting the French delegation presented a revised map which shows the extended A and B zones including 319 communes. See also point 2c)

The Swedish delegation gave a presentation on the avian influenza situation. The disease was confirmed in two ducks on the South East coast of Sweden on 28 February. The Swedish Authorities have immediately put the measures according to 2006/115/EC in place. The dead birds were found in hot water close to a nuclear power plant. Biosecurity measures will be strengthened. The Commission invited Sweden to send more written information.

The Greek delegation informed about the latest cases of H5N1 found in wild birds. In the high risk area Evros only 3 positive birds were found. The Commission requested to provide more detailed information on the species tested in Evros.

The Italian delegation stated that 19 cases of H5N1 were confirmed in the South of Italy in swans. One case was confirmed in a duck in Umbria. According to the Italian delegate the origin of the disease can be clearly identified: abnormal migration of swans coming from the Balkans and going to the South of Italy due to cold weather.

The Slovenian delegation presented and distributed a table summarising positive findings in wild birds up till 28 February 2006. Two protection and surveillance zones according to decision 2006/115/EC were set up in the North of the country (Muta and Maribor). As from 17 February on, poultry has to be kept inside in the whole territory. Cultural gatherings are prohibited in Slovenia.

The Slovakian delegation distributed and presented “Avian influenza – occurrence in Slovakia”. The first suspicion was found in two birds on 20 February and H5N1 was confirmed by the Community Reference Laboratory on 24 February. Census of poultry and wild birds was launched. 620 wild birds have been analysed up till now.

The Hungarian delegation informed about 7 confirmed cases for H5N1 in mute swans in the South of the country. All measures are applied and so far no cases in domestic poultry were recorded. A new suspect case was detected in the North of the country close to Budapest.

The Austrian delegation informed that the H5N1 virus was detected in one swan, two chicken and three ducks in an animal shelter in Graz. Samples were also taken from cats living in the animal shelter but results of the analysis are not yet available. The Commission requested to be kept informed of further developments.

The Commission gave information concerning the situation in Russia where a lot of cases in wild birds were found over the last months. Moreover numerous outbreaks were recorded in Ukraine. The explosion of the disease in the EU seems linked to abnormal migration of birds from Eastern Europe, due to the extreme cold.
The Commission distributed “Latest information on the avian influenza situation in Switzerland 1-3-2006”.

2. Exchange of views and possible opinion of the Committee on a draft Commission Decision on the evolution of animal diseases in the Community and in third countries and in particular in relation to avian influenza

a) The Commission presented a “draft Commission decision concerning certain protection measures in relation to a suspicion of highly pathogenic avian influenza in Switzerland”.

The Commission’s representative informed that this decision takes account of the Agreement between the European Community and the Swiss Confederation in trade on agricultural products. Following the notification of an isolation of an H5 avian influenza virus collected from wild species near Lake Geneva, Switzerland has notified that it is applying the same rigorous measures as laid down in Decisions 2006/115/EC (wild birds) and 2006/135/EC (poultry). Therefore there is no need for further restrictions from the EU.

Vote: Unanimously in favour.

b) The Commission presented a “draft Commission decision amending for the second time Decision 2005/758/EC as regards the extension of the parts of Croatia subject to certain protection measures in relation highly pathogenic avian influenza”.

The purpose of this draft Decision is to extend the regionalised import ban already in place for Croatia to include the island of Čiovo, where the H5N1 virus was confirmed in a wild swan last week.

Vote: Unanimously in favour.

c) The Commission presented a “draft Commission decision amending Decision 2006/135/EC as regarding the establishment of areas A and B in France due to an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza in that Member State”.

Following the outbreak of avian influenza on a turkey farm in the department of Ain last week, France took the measures in accordance with Decision 2006/135/EC. The protection, surveillance and buffer zones cover 319 communes surrounding the “Dombes” region where cases in wild birds have been detected and where the affected turkey farm was located.

Vote: Unanimously in favour. Luxembourg absent but represented by Hungary

3. Exchange of views of the Committee on a draft Commission Regulation laying down measures with regard to imports of products of animal origin by travellers for personal consumption (SANCO/10195/2006/Rev.4) (Working Document only) (AEF/HN)
Following an opinion adopted by EFSA on 13 September 2005, illegal importation of avian commodities was identified as representing an additional risk. It is therefore appropriate to further strengthen checks on travellers’ luggage, in particular of those travellers arriving from third countries affected by highly pathogenic avian influenza. The Commission submitted for discussion a self-declaration form with detailed explanation on the animal health risks of certain products of animal origin. This form is widely used by different third countries with regard to international travellers to choose the appropriate customs entry and to target checks carried out by customs services. The Commission’s representative highlighted the good cooperation with DG TAXUD. Several Member States commented on this document and were asked to send their remarks in written. The Commission requested the Member States’ delegates to discuss the document with relevant internal stakeholders including Customs Authorities, in order to obtain a fully representative opinion on the working document presented.

At the end of the meeting the Committee agreed on the following statement:

“Statement of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health
1 March 2006

The Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCOFCAH) has been informed by Germany on the finding of a cat infected with the “Asian strain” of the Avian Influenza virus H5N1 (hereby called H5N1) in the island of Ruegen, where a high number of infected wild birds had been found in the last weeks. The finding of H5N1 in the cat in question has probably occurred due to its exposure to infected wild birds.

The SCOFCAH has congratulated Germany for the high level of surveillance for the disease in birds as well as other animals, which enabled this unusual case in a cat to be swiftly identified.

Other cases of Avian Influenza caused by the H5N1 virus have been described in cats and other felines in the last years in Asia. Other carnivores such as civet cats are also shown to be susceptible to H5N1.

However, current knowledge indicates the no H5N1 infection has ever occurred in humans due to animals other than domestic poultry. Current knowledge suggests that the disease in carnivores such as cats is a “cul de sac” of the infection that has not lead to an increase in the risk posed by this virus for animal or public health.

No information is currently available to either confirm or exclude the possibility of H5N1 spreading to other carnivores, such as dogs.

Nevertheless, in the light of the current knowledge and disease situation, the SCOFCAH deems appropriate to issue the following precautionary recommendations:

In areas where H5N1 has been confirmed in wild birds:
- sick or dead cats and dogs that may have had contacts with infected birds or their carcasses should undergo veterinary inspection or post-mortem examination. When felt necessary by the veterinarian and in accordance with the instructions given by the veterinary authorities, further testing should be carried out;
- contacts between domestic carnivores, particularly cats, and wild birds should be prevented, i.e. cats should be kept indoors and dogs should be kept on a leash or otherwise restrained, and kept under control by the owner;
- where stray cats or dogs are found dead they should not be touched and the veterinary authorities should be informed, so that post-mortem examination and further testing can be performed, as appropriate.”

Miscellaneous

1) UK proposed a discussion on intra-community trade in game birds

The UK delegation is concerned that trade in game birds from a high risk area could pose a risk as regards HPAI H5N1. Some Member States supported the UK. The Commission concluded that this issue should be further reflected.

2) Several delegations raised the issue of pigeon’s races. According to some Member States pigeons should be allowed to be released for pigeon’s races.

3) Spain and Latvia submitted their vaccination programmes against avian influenza in zoo birds.

The Commission will prepare a summary on the zoo vaccination programmes that were so far submitted by the Member States.

4) Sweden requested a discussion on farms were birds can not be confined

5) Denmark requested a recommendation concerning the infection of roads around an outbreak in wild birds

6) The Commission informed the Committee on the latest development of FMD in Turkey. The 2.5 million doses of trivalent vaccine arrived well in Turkey. A first round of vaccination has been carried out in the most affected areas. The experts that have been on the spot in Turkey, provided information at yesterday’s O.I.E. meeting.
N.B. The proposals on which the Committee expressed an opinion are subject to a defined procedure in relation to the formal adoption by the Commission. Mission reports are available on the Internet at the following address: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/inspections/vi/reports/index_en.html

Bernard Van Goethem
Acting Director/Directeur f.f.