

**SUMMARY RECORD OF THE
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE FOOD CHAIN AND ANIMAL
HEALTH
&
OF THE ORNIS COMMITTEE/SWG
HELD IN BRUSSELS ON 1 DECEMBER 2006
(Section Animal Health and Welfare)**

Presidents: Alberto Laddomada (Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection) /
Patrick Murphy (Directorate General for the Environment)

All the Member States were represented, in addition Bulgaria, Romania and Norway. Representatives from EFSA, ECDC, OIE, FAO and NGO's: Wetlands International, CWS-AEWA, EURING, Birdlife and FACE participated.

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 perspectives. 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,
- 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.

OVERVIEW ON AVIAN INFLUENZA AND WILD BIRDS

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

The Community Reference Laboratory for avian influenza in Weybridge (CRL, epidemiological unit) gave an overview detailing the number of wild birds tested and the results. For the period of July 2005 until end of January 2006 about 40.000 birds were tested with negative results. The main focus was on the results obtained between February and May 2006, when around 110.000 wild birds were tested, 748 of which have been found positive ([ADNS reports](#)).

The first results emerging from a more detailed analysis of the surveillance data on wild birds tested between February – May 2006 were presented by the CRL. Data has been received from all Member States. However due to the lack of a certain degree of detail the analysis is based on that of 23 MS ([see copy of presentation of CRL](#)).

A first overview of the preliminary results of this analysis showed that more than 58.000 birds of 369 species were tested, with 63 species being found positive for the Asian avian influenza strain H5N1. A break down by species in relation to the identified high risk species was given. Half of these concern *Anseriformes*.

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 systems for the different species (sampling numbers and geographical distribution) which need to be taken into account in relation to interpretation of this data.

Member States noted however that in times of crisis the level of detail for reporting poses significant difficulties for the competent authorities. 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](#)). 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 of results for surveillance for avian influenza in poultry in 2005.

Surveillance in poultry has been carried out since 2002/03 on the basis of serological investigations in the holding or at slaughter. The survey strategy aims at specifically targeting “at risk” poultry categories due to their husbandry system such as free range or multi age laying hens, number of contacts, poultry density, specific species susceptibility and longer lifespan. In 2005 78 holdings were found seropositive (69 holdings for H5, 5 holdings for H7, 4 holdings for non H5 or H7 AI). Most concerned species are ducks and geese, then laying hens and ratites. Seropositive findings have to be followed up by epidemiological investigations including virus detection tests). ([see full report](#))

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 a meeting of a 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](#))

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

4.1. Experiences at Member State level were presented by CVO Professor Willeberg of the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration ([see copy of his presentation](#)). 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 reaching 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.

4.2. The Commission representative referred to the legal requirements for the identification of higher risk areas, intensified wild bird surveillance, notification of abnormal morbidity and mortality, early detection systems in poultry populations and certain restrictions for poultry movements from farms when HPAI H5N1 is detected in wild birds in the area. The latter measures have been adapted in the course of the experiences gained by Member States, allowing more flexibility based on risk assessment that takes better account of the geographical, epidemiological and ecological factors of such findings. Additional protection measures have also been

introduced for the keeping and trading of game birds for restocking ([see presentation](#)). In addition a presentation prepared by the CVO of Denmark on the practical experience and breaches in biosecurity was distributed ([see presentation](#)).

5. Scientific studies and reviews that have been conducted.

5.1. 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 ([see copy of presentation by Ward Hagemeyer](#))

5.2. 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](#)).

5.3. 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 birds and poultry and/or humans. It is intended to make information from this study available for the public via a web based application.

6. The international/global perspective (international conservation bodies etc.).

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 the 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 ([see presentation of 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 hunters, who have an important role to play in the detection of avian influenza and in promoting awareness about it ([see presentation of 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. ([see presentation by Martin Fowle of RSPB](#))

7. Future studies and work planned.

The Commission representative reported that DG RTD had recently approved more than 28 million Euros for the funding of 17 projects following a specific call for avian and human pandemic influenza. A short summary of these projects was handed out which will cover research into diagnostics, vaccine development and immunity and studies on virus epidemiology, and resistance as well as exchange of expertise.

With respect to wild birds reference was made to the project, titled NEW FLUBIRD which aims to establish a network of virologists, ornithologists, epidemiologists and modellers gathering data not only from Europe, but also from Africa, Middle East and Eastern Europe to provide for an early warning system in relation to avian influenza and wild birds. ([MEMO/06/381](#))

8. Data needs, data sources and information gathering.

The Commission representative presented the current protocol for reporting positive and negative surveillance results in wild birds to the Commission, which needed to be adapted with respect to the localisation of the sampling in different zones after outbreaks in poultry or positive findings in wild birds.

9. Communicating on avian influenza and the role of wild birds.

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 shared 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).

The experience of a national conservation NGO in dealing with this subject was presented by BirdWatch Ireland ([see presentation of 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.

In the debate on communication the need to avoid over-reaction of the public and media was emphasized. There was a perception of too much intervention by Brussels (e.g. backyard producers complain about restrictions). It was important for the NGO community to support the measures of the public authorities in their communication campaigns.

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.

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DRAFTS PRESENTED FOR AN OPINION
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10. Exchange of views and possible opinion of the committee on a draft Commission Decision establishing an alternative health mark pursuant to Directive 2005/94/EC on Community measures for the control of avian influenza (Doc. SANCO/10580/2006-Rev.4).

Directive 2005/94/EC provides for Community measures to avoid the spread of avian influenza. It foresees that fresh meat obtained from poultry originating from holdings located in the established protection zone does not enter intra-Community or international trade. Directive 92/66/EEC lays down Community measures to be applied in the event of an outbreak of Newcastle disease in poultry in order to avoid the spread of the disease. Those measures include the establishment of protection and surveillance zones and a prohibition on the transport of poultry meat in and from such zones unless the transport is authorised by the competent authority under certain conditions. As specified in both Directives such meat must bear the mark provided for in Annex II of Directive 2002/99/EC laying down the animal health rules governing the production, processing, distribution and introduction of products of animal origin for human consumption. That mark must bear a diagonal cross and is commonly called “cross stamp”. Member States have reported that this special identification mark is poorly accepted by operators and customers and it is therefore the purpose of this Decision to determine an alternative identification mark. This alternative identification mark should be clearly distinguishable from other identification and health marks to be applied for fresh poultry meat in accordance with Regulations (EC) No 853/2004 or 2076/2005, which lays down transitional arrangements for the implementation of Regulation (EC) No 853/2004.

Vote: unanimous in favour.

11. Exchange of views and possible opinion of the committee on a draft Commission Decision amending Decisions 2006/415/EC, 2006/416/EC and 2006/563/EC as regards the health mark to be applied to fresh poultry meat (Doc. SANCO/10587/2006-Rev.4).

Decision 2006/415/EC concerning certain protection measures in relation to highly pathogenic avian influenza of the subtype H5N1 in poultry in the Community, Decision 2006/416/EC concerning certain transitional measures in relation to highly pathogenic avian influenza in poultry or other captive birds and Decision 2006/563/EC concerning certain protection measures in relation to highly pathogenic avian influenza of subtype H5N1 in wild birds in the Community all require the marking of meat from poultry and farmed feathered game originating in restricted areas and destined for the national market with a mark provided for in Directive 2002/99/EC. These Decisions shall be amended to provide for the use of the established alternative identification mark as envisaged by draft proposal SANCO/10580/2006-Rev.4.

In addition, the Annex of Decision 2006/415/EC should be amended to take into account that Hungary has notified to the Commission that all control measures in relation to an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza of the subtype H5N1 in certain duck and geese holdings have been ceased by 31 August 2006.

Vote: unanimous in favour.

12. Exchange of views and possible opinion of the committee on a draft Commission decision of establishing new veterinary certificates related to the introduction into the Community of live animals, semen, embryos and ova and products of animal origin within the framework of decisions 79/542/EEC, 92/260/EEC, 93/195/EEC, 93/196/EEC, 93/197/EEC, 95/328/CE, 96/333/EC, 96/539/EC, 96/540/EC, 2000/572/EC, 2000/585/EC, 2000/666/EC, 2002/613/EC, 2003/56/EC, 2003/779/EC, 2003/804/EC, 2003/858/EC, 2003/863/EC, 2003/881/EC, 2004/407/EC, 2004/438/EC, 2004/595/EC, 2004/639/EC and 2006/168/EC (Doc. SANCO/10178/2005 - Rev.16).

The veterinary and sanitary certificates required by Community legislation for the introduction of live animals, semen, embryos and ova and products of animal origin into the Community are presented at the moment in various graphic models laid down in dozens of fragmented provisions. To each different graphic model corresponds a substantial standardization of content of the certificates as far as the information to be provided is concerned. The use of the certificates by third countries authorities will significantly be simplified by the standardization of the existing models.

This standardization proves to be essential for an efficient data transfer of certificates within the framework of the system implemented by Commission Decision 2003/623/EC of 19 August 2003 on the development of an integrated veterinary data processing system called TRACES.

The setting up of a harmonized template will accelerate and make administrative procedures easier at the border, allowing an automated transfer of data held in these certificates, to the "Common Veterinary Entry Documents" as foreseen by Commission Regulation (EC) No 136/2004 of 22 January 2004 laying down procedures for veterinary checks at Community border inspection posts on products imported from third countries and Commission Regulation (EC) No 282/2004 of 18 February 2004 introducing a document for the declaration of, and veterinary checks on, animals from third countries entering the Community.

Half of all existing certificates have already been reviewed and presented according to the presented format. The other certificates are in an on-going process to be modified. So this proposal is to prevent the publication of 80 certificates which are going to be changed, not only the presentation but the content as well, during the next 9 months and to allow the use of the certificates already available in TRACES and presented according to the new format.

Vote: in favour, 39 votes abstained.

13. Exchange of views and possible opinion of the committee on a draft Commission Decision amending Decision 2005/648/EC concerning protection measures in relation to Newcastle disease in Bulgaria (Doc. SANCO/10786/2006 – Rev.2)

Commission Decision 2005/648/EC concerning protection measures in relation to Newcastle disease in Bulgaria, was adopted in 2005 following an outbreak of Newcastle disease in the administrative district of Vratsa in Bulgaria. Bulgaria has notified to the Commission two new outbreaks of Newcastle disease on its territory, in the municipality of Dobrichka situated in the administrative district of Dobrich and in the municipality of Kubrat in the administrative district of Razgrad. Bulgaria has applied the necessary disease control measures and has sent further information on the disease situation to the Commission. Taking account of the current epidemiology situation in Bulgaria in relation to Newcastle disease, it is appropriate to limit the suspension of imports to these municipalities in Bulgaria and they should therefore be added to the Annex to Decision 2005/648/EC.

Vote: unanimous in favour.

14. Exchange of views and possible opinion of the committee on a draft Commission Decision amending Decision 2005/760/EC as regards certain protection measures in relation to highly pathogenic avian influenza and imports of birds other than poultry into the Community (Doc. SANCO/10798/2006 – Rev.1)

Following the outbreak of avian influenza in south-eastern Asia in 2004, caused by a highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of the virus, the Commission adopted several protection measures in relation to that disease. One of those measures is Commission Decision 2005/760/EC concerning certain protection measures in relation to the import of captive birds from third countries. Commission Decision 2005/760/EC is currently applicable until 31 December 2006.

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Panel on animal health and welfare (AHAW) adopted in October 2006 a Scientific Opinion on the animal health and welfare risks associated with the import of wild birds other than poultry into the Community. The Opinion has identified a number of areas whereby improvements would significantly reduce any identified risk related to the import of birds other than poultry. However, the Opinion became officially available on 14 November 2006 and it is therefore appropriate to prolong for the moment the current import ban (Decision 2005/760/EC) so that careful consideration can be given to the information laid down in the Scientific Opinion.

The restrictions relating to the imports of birds other than poultry as laid down in Decision 2005/760/EC should therefore be continued for a period of 3 months.

Vote: unanimous in favour.