

THE AVIAN INFLUENZA SITUATION IN EC MEMBER STATES

Statement by the European Communities at the meeting held on 24-25 June 2003

1. At the last Committee, the provided information on the avian influenza situation in the Netherlands. However, some time later some avian influenza cases occurred in Belgium, and later, one in Germany as well. All cases were linked with the Dutch outbreaks via geographical proximity. Below is an update on the situation within the European Communities.

Netherlands

2. Since the start of the epidemic on 28 February this year, 255 holdings have been found to be definitely infected with avian influenza, of which 22 were diagnosed on non-commercial holdings (i.e. hobby- or small backyard flocks). The majority of the infected holdings were in the province of Gelderland, while the remaining outbreaks were in the provinces of Limburg, Utrecht and Noord-Brabant. Since the beginning of May, however, there have not been any more suspicions or outbreaks.

3. In total 30.3 million avian influenza susceptible birds have been killed. Culling has been completed both on the commercial holdings by the end of April as well as of hobby- or small backyard birds by mid-June.

4. At the start of the epidemic, the Dutch authorities immediately put in place stringent protective measures, even exceeding the measures foreseen by EC legislation of Directive 92/40/EEC for the control of avian influenza. The measures have been reinforced by the Commission Decisions which were taken in the framework of the Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health. As previously reported, this implied that an immediate ban of dispatch for live poultry and hatching eggs to other member States and third countries was put in place. No fresh poultry meat obtained from poultry originating in the surveillance zones could be dispatched to other member States or third countries. These measures have now been relaxed in view of the favourable developments and will continue to be relaxed gradually.

5. Meanwhile a plan has been set up to repopulate the poultry holdings under strict conditions and in a phased manner. The procedures have been endorsed by a Commission Decision.

6. Likewise, the Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health has agreed to re-authorize as of 18 June the export of live poultry and hatching eggs from provinces which have not experienced any avian influenza outbreaks. (Restrictions remain in place for the five provinces with surveillance zones: Flevoland, Gelderland, Limburg, Noord-Brabant and Utrecht.)

7. Considering the events, below is some further information on the public health aspects.

8. During culling procedures in avian influenza affected farms 88 people have developed conjunctivitis and a few influenza like illnesses with headache and respiratory signs. On 17 April 2003, a Dutch veterinarian died of respiratory distress. Avian influenza virus was isolated from his lungs. As no other possible cause for his deadly pneumonia could be found, it was assumed that the infection with avian influenza has led to his death.

9. The protection measures already in force to protect workers at risk were tightened including the use of protective clothing, glasses, gloves, vaccination against human influenza and the use of antiviral drugs. Following these additional measures the incidence rate of avian influenza infections in humans drastically dropped and no further serious cases of avian influenza were recorded in humans. (The case of the veterinarian who died can therefore be considered as a tragic, but single incident. The data currently available suggest that during the epidemic no significant human-to-human transmission of virus has taken place and the virus has not increased its virulence for human beings. Of course, further scientific investigations are following up on these issues.)

Belgium

10. On 11 March the suspicion of an avian influenza outbreak in Belgium, in a municipality close to the Dutch border, had not been confirmed. Nevertheless, the Belgian authorities took swift and thorough actions similar to the Dutch control measures in order to contain the threat of the disease.

11. However, on 18 April, the first avian influenza outbreak was confirmed in the province of Limburg, in the surveillance zone established following an outbreak in the Netherlands near the Belgian border. The same swift measures as before were put in place immediately after the suspicion.

12. In total eight outbreaks occurred between 18 and 27 April and a total of 2.9 million poultry were culled in 119 commercial farms and 189 backyard flocks. Belgium applied the strategy of culling all poultry within a one kilometre radius and all commercial poultry farms within a three kilometre radius around an outbreak. In addition, a supplementary compartmentalization strategy was applied. (All activities in relation to the poultry sector (such as movements of poultry, of trucks for feed and egg collection) and some other agricultural activities are only allowed within the compartment.)

13. Following the avian influenza outbreak in Germany, Belgium culled ten poultry farms preventively, because they had indirect contact via a feed lorry with the affected farm in Germany.

14. Since no further outbreaks occurred until 26 May, the restriction measures for Belgium were limited to the provinces of Antwerp and Limburg. The rest of the country could resume exports of live poultry and hatching eggs. From 12 June onwards, the restrictions are limited to the established surveillance zones only.

Germany

15. On 9 May, the German authorities informed the Commission services of a serious suspicion of avian influenza in a poultry farm, situated near the Dutch border, in a municipality in the Land North Rhine-Westphalia, and it was confirmed two days later. Germany also immediately implemented the measures foreseen in Commission Directive 92/40/EEC. In addition, a standstill of live poultry and hatching eggs in North Rhine-Westphalia was implemented and trade and export banned from this region.

16. Germany applied culling of all poultry farms within the three-kilometre area around the infected farm. However, the outbreak was very limited and only concerned this confirmed case. Therefore, the safeguard measures elapsed on 24 June.

17. Member States and third countries have been regularly updated on the development of the situation.

18. The immediate and stringent implementation of disease control measures as described above clearly demonstrate that member States and the Commission reacted promptly to contain the disease and safeguard the health status of trading partners.

19. In conclusion, the three affected member States are now in the process of recovering from the avian influenza epidemic. The measures to contain the disease are now limited to the surveillance zones and will be lifted after the appropriate time-lapse.
