

AVIAN INFLUENZA H9N2

Communication from Colombia

The following communication, received on 18 January 2006, is being circulated at the request of the delegation of Colombia.

1. Colombia hereby submits to the Committee a report supplementing document G/SPS/GEN/602 presented at the meeting of 24 October 2005 in connection with the situation in Colombia with regard to avian influenza subtype H9N2, in order to address the doubts and concerns raised, appeal for the lifting of the trade restrictions imposed by a number of countries and emphasize the absence of notifiable avian influenza viruses in national territory.

2. In 2005, in accordance with OIE guidelines, Colombia carried out extensive sampling under its active avian influenza surveillance. More than 30,000 samples were taken from 683 commercial farms belonging to different production systems, in accordance with the statistical scheme adopted. As a result of this sampling exercise, evidence of seroreactivity to the avian influenza virus type A, subtype H9N2, was found in three breeder farms located in Fresno, a municipality in the department of Tolima. The diagnosis was confirmed by the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) of the United States Department of Agriculture, which is the avian influenza reference laboratory for the American continent.

3. It is important to note that in the three above-mentioned farms there was no clinical evidence of the disease or any increase in mortality or changes in the productive parameters of the poultry populations concerned, and that the virus detected is a subtype not notifiable to the OIE.

4. Once the finding had been confirmed, a team of veterinarians, bacteriologists, environmentalists and health-care and support staff went to the area. A total of 67 people from various public and private institutions (the health, environment and agriculture sectors and the poultry farmers' association) were involved and, pursuant to emergency planning provisions, they went into action immediately. Their work was supervised and coordinated by the Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA), which organized them into two groups. The first group carried out epidemiological surveillance and monitoring activities in a 5 km area around the quarantined farms, and the second group worked in a 15 km radius around that area.

5. All establishments with commercial and backyard poultry in the areas subject to epidemiological surveillance and tracing were inspected (layers, broilers, genetic material, hatcheries, quail, geese, wild birds in their natural environment and in captivity, ducks, ornamental birds and fighting birds). All the workers of the company that owns the three farms, and those of the farms most at risk, were medically examined, and their places of residence were also checked for the presence of any species of bird. All migratory bird arrival sites, waterways, places where poultry

meat is distributed and consumed, live bird suppliers, poultry droppings storage and distribution areas, processing plants, farms for which birds (progeny) are destined, places where concentrations of birds are found and bird markets were inspected, yet no other evidence of the presence of the avian influenza virus or other subtypes thereof was found. However, as an emergency measure, the three farms concerned have been kept in quarantine and under official 24-hour surveillance, on an ongoing basis, since the date when the seroreactivity was detected.

6. During the epidemiological investigation, 1,779 premises were inspected and 5,758 serological samples - in addition to supplementary samples in the form of tracheal or cloacal swabs and tissues - were collected from 957 establishments with backyard and commercial poultry, in an attempt to isolate the virus. 356 visits were also made to the homes of company workers and their families. As part of the epidemiological tracing exercise, a further 1,768 samples were taken at 25 farms from the progeny of the quarantined farms. All of the samples tested negative.

7. None of the farms, neither those within the areas subject to surveillance and monitoring nor those with progeny from the quarantined farms, presented any symptoms consistent with avian influenza or showed any unusual increases in mortality or changes in productive and reproductive parameters.

8. Once the laboratory results had been analysed and the respective risk assessment procedures carried out, the ICA gave authorization for the birds to be taken to the processing plant of the company that owned them, to be destroyed. To secure such authorization, risk mitigation procedures were implemented and the operation was supervised by officials.

9. The affected farms will continue to be part of a sentinelization process until they are repopulated; they have been included in a programme of frequent serological surveillance in 2006.

10. It should be stressed that Colombia has given priority to the principle of transparency by notifying the world of the above-mentioned findings, even though it is not necessary to notify the detected subtype H9 pursuant to Chapter 2.7.12 of the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code. The response of some countries, however, was not consistent with the reality of the situation and some even maintain restrictions on trade in Colombian poultry products, thus violating the principles of the SPS Agreement and the regional agreements to which Colombia is a party.

11. Colombia, through the Andean Community, has requested the assistance of OIE laboratory and field experts to assess the action already taken and advise on further supplementary measures.

12. Colombia endorses the Brasilia Declaration of 2 December 2005, adopted at the Hemispheric Conference on the Surveillance and Prevention of Avian Influenza, which refers to the need for countries to provide notification in accordance with OIE standards and recommendations, and to respond pursuant to the provisions of the OIE and the WTO, with a view to preventing the imposition of trade restrictions not based on science.

13. Lastly, Colombia would like to thank the countries which have acknowledged the efforts it has made, its timely response and the example it has given to the world by taking action to deal with the discovery of non-notifiable low pathogenic subtype H9N2 in order to protect and maintain animal health in the country and the region.
