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Questions and Answers on EU action on Avian Influenza and Flu Pandemic Preparedness

What is Avian Influenza?

Avian Influenza is a virulent and highly contagious viral disease which occurs in poultry and other birds. There are various strains of the avian influenza virus, with the high pathogenic strains having almost 100% fatality rates. Wild birds are often carriers of the low pathogenic strains of the virus without showing any symptoms, and contact of domestic flocks with wild migratory birds has been at the origin of many epidemics in poultry. Avian influenza can occasionally spread to humans and other animals, usually following direct contact with infected birds.

What measures are in place to prevent avian influenza being imported into the European Union from a third country?

The Commission has undertaken a number of actions to protect the EU from disease introduction from Asia, Russia and Kazakhstan. Imports of live birds and risky poultry products such as fresh poultry meat and untreated feathers from the concerned countries have been prohibited. However, this ban does not concern heat-treated poultry meat, as the heat-treatment (70 degrees) destroys the avian influenza virus.

The disease situation in Asia is regularly reviewed at the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, where the safeguard measures taken are updated as appropriate. At present, the import ban concerns Cambodia, China including Hong Kong, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, North Korea, Pakistan, Thailand, Vietnam, Russia and Kazakhstan.

What is the EU doing to help Asia tackle the current outbreak there?

The ongoing outbreak of highly pathogenic Avian Influenza in Asia has led to the death or the killing and destruction of over 125 million birds, economic losses estimated at €8-12 billion and the death of around 50 people. Furthermore, there are fears that this particular virus strain may eventually lead to a human flu pandemic.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Animal Health Organisation (OIE) have called for decisive action by governments to help the countries affected to limit the scale of the bird flu outbreak and so also reduce the risk for public health in Asia.

In coordination with the relevant international organisations, the European Commission has already provided some emergency technical and financial support to the concerned countries, Vietnam in particular, to help to control the disease in poultry and other birds and prevent as much as possible the spread of the virus to humans.

However, the eradication of avian flu from Asia cannot be considered a realistic short-term objective and adequate planning and co-ordination of future actions and control measures is essential.

The FAO is currently finalising a regional master plan including a road map and time frame, within which framework the concerned countries can then draft their own country plans. This FAO master plan and the country plans will be carefully studied as soon as available, in view of possible support by the Commission.

How will the Commission's new proposed Directive on avian influenza improve things?

The Commission's proposal for a Directive on measures for the control of avian influenza (adopted by the Commission on 28 April 2005) aims to update EU measures based on lessons learned from recent epidemics and new scientific knowledge on how the disease spreads and risks to human health. Current EU legislation on avian influenza control is laid down in Council Directive 92/40/EEC. The current Directive only establishes control measures against the so-called "highly pathogenic" avian influenza viruses, those causing major disease outbreaks in poultry and that may also occasionally infect humans. However, there is now evidence that these highly pathogenic viruses actually originate from the so-called "low-pathogenic" avian influenza viruses as a result of virus mutation. In order to prevent major avian influenza outbreaks, the new legislation would also establish compulsory surveillance and control measures against the low pathogenic avian influenza viruses that can be transmitted to domestic poultry from wild birds such as ducks and geese. The low pathogenic viruses cannot be eradicated from wild birds, but the infection of domestic poultry can be effectively controlled and virus mutation into the highly pathogenic forms can be prevented. The aim of the new legislation is to ensure that the most appropriate surveillance and prevention measures against avian flu are in place and that the health risks, economic costs and the negative impact on society in the event of an outbreak are minimised. The new Directive must be adopted by the Council and then transposed into national legislation in all EU Member States before entering fully into force on 1 January 2007. The adoption of the new Directive is a priority for the UK Presidency during the autumn of 2005. For more detailed information on the new proposed Directive, see [MEMO/05/142](#).

What has been the recent situation of avian influenza outbreaks?

In recent years the poultry industry worldwide has suffered serious damage due to avian flu epidemics. Since 2003, the particularly virulent H5N1 strain of the disease has caused more than 125 million birds to die or be destroyed in South-East Asia. Avian flu is still endemic in this region of the world and eradication is proving extremely difficult. Outbreaks of avian flu also occurred in the USA, Canada and South Africa in 2004.

In the EU, recent major outbreaks of avian flu occurred in Italy (1999-2000) and the Netherlands, with incidences in Belgium and Germany (2003). The outbreak in the Netherlands led to the destruction of around 30 million birds and direct economic costs of more than €150 million.

On 22 July 2005, Russia announced the outbreak of an avian disease in an area bordering Kazakhstan, confirmed on 23 July to be the H5 avian flu virus. Kazakhstan confirmed an avian influenza outbreak in geese on 2 August and on 8 August Mongolia confirmed that avian influenza has been isolated from samples taken from migratory birds.

What measures has the EU taken to guard against avian influenza in the European Union?

EU legislation to control avian influenza is laid down in Directive 92/40/EEC. All suspected cases of AI must be investigated and appropriate measures taken in case of confirmation of high pathogenic (highly virulent) avian influenza. To limit the spread of the virus, infected poultry must be killed in a humane way and disposed off safely. Feeding stuffs, contaminated equipment and manure must be destroyed or treated to inactivate the virus.

To prevent further spread of disease the veterinary authorities are required to immediately put in place movement restrictions on the affected holdings and on all farms in a radius of at least 10-km around these holdings, the so called surveillance zone. If necessary, stamping-out measures can also be extended to poultry farms in the vicinity of or which have had dangerous contacts with infected farms.

In accordance with Community legislation, all Member States have avian influenza contingency plans in place to ensure that the most appropriate measures are immediately implemented.

At farm level preventive hygienic measures such as cleaning and disinfection are crucial. Disease awareness amongst farmers and cooperation by all people in the poultry sector must ensure that the strictest biosecurity measures are applied to prevent disease spread.

What threats does avian influenza pose to human health?

In most cases, avian influenza viruses do not infect humans. However, these viruses have the tendency to mutate and may occasionally spread to other animals and to humans. In particular, there have been cases of humans who were in direct contact with diseased birds becoming infected with certain highly pathogenic subtypes of the avian flu virus. In South-East Asia, around 50 people have died from avian flu since the current outbreak began. A major concern now is that a possible mutation or genetic change of the virus circulating in Asia could lead to the avian flu virus transforming into a new human strain of influenza capable of human-to-human transmission. Such a mutated virus could cause a human flu pandemic. The European Commission and EU Member States are working continually on pandemic influenza planning and response measures in case of such an eventuality.

What is the Commission doing to help the EU prepare for a potential human flu pandemic?

The Commission published on 20 March 2004 its working paper on **Community pandemic influenza preparedness and response planning**. This identified the key components of the EU strategy to face up to pandemic influenza as the following:

- the preparation and testing of national preparedness plans;
- surveillance and networking of national reference laboratories to identify the pandemic strain quickly;
- effective outbreak management through timely advice,
- early notification of cases, outbreak assistance and coordination of responses of Member States, and
- the adequate and timely supply of vaccines and anti-viral drugs.

Since the publication of this plan, the Commission has been **working with Member States and the World Health Organisation** to help Member States draw up and improve their national preparedness plans. A workshop was held with the Member States and the WHO on 2-3 March 2005 to take this process forward, and a follow-up workshop will take place in the autumn to address weaknesses and close gaps.

The Commission is organising a **command-post exercise** this autumn to test communications, exchanges of information and interaction between the competent authorities at EU level and the coordination and inter-operability of national plans. A conference is planned after the exercise to evaluate the lessons learnt and to prepare recommendations.

Networks of veterinary and human health laboratories are already in place in the EU to address the threat of Influenza viruses. The European Union has a surveillance network established through Community co-funding known as the European Influenza Surveillance Scheme (EISS). The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) is expected to assume the leading and determinant role in this field.

The Commission is working to establish improved co-operation between this network and the Community Reference Laboratory for Avian Influenza, as well as the relevant European and international organisations dealing with animal and human health, to ensure better preparation in case of a pandemic. **A joint workshop of avian and human flu experts was held earlier this year to improve coordination.** A meeting of experts from Member States, EISS and ECDC was called by the Commission on 21 June to prepare a Technical Guidance Document on procedures for communication to Member States, the ECDC and the Commission about influenza A/H5 events in humans. The document is now ready and it will be agreed at the next meeting (20 September) of the competent authorities of the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS). The EWRS is the informatic tool that links Member States, the ECDC and the Commission in case of emergencies due to communicable diseases of Community relevance. Through the EWRS the Member States are regularly updating the Commission on the public health measures undertaken after the recent events reported by Russia. A meeting of the Chief Medical Officers (CMO) and of the Chief Veterinary Officers (CVO) will take place on 22 September in Luxemburg. During this meeting, an update of the situation concerning veterinary and public health measures is expected and issues related to the co-ordination among the two sectors will be discussed.

The Commission is promoting **talks with the Health Security Committee and the European Vaccine Manufacturers** to find an agreed way to ensure sufficiency of influenza vaccines in the EU in the shortest possible time in case of a pandemic.

For antivirals the Commission is also pursuing talks with industry to discuss **availability of antivirals** in different forms and in particular the supply difficulties experienced by several Member States.

The Commission proposed on 6 April a European Parliament and Council regulation to establish a solidarity fund that would allow for **reimbursement of costs up to 1000 million euros annually that might be incurred in a major public health emergency**, which covers costs on vaccines and antivirals. EU Member States will be reimbursed following a proposal by the Commission and a favourable decision taken by qualified majority by the Council. This could act as an incentive for the Member States to conclude advance purchase agreements with the industry if they so wish and help contributing towards the creation of conditions of equity of supply.

What research activities are there in the area of avian flu?

The European Union has allocated €6.5m to a number of projects researching different aspects of the Avian influenza (AI) virus. These include development of new vaccines, studies on transmission of the disease among bird populations and to humans, and improved methods for diagnosis. The European Union also has several projects, totalling €12.4m, seeking to develop new technologies to combat a pandemic of influenza in the human population, through the development of new vaccines, establishing surveillance networks, monitoring drug resistance and examining the use of antivirals.

More information:

- Full timeline of Commission response to avian influenza:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/animal/diseases/controlmeasures/avian/ai_chrono_12-08-2005.pdf#page=58

- Background on avian influenza:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/animal/diseases/controlmeasures/avian/index_en.htm

- Background on influenza pandemic preparedness:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_threats/com/Influenza/influenza_en.htm