

Update bird flu on 04.12.2005

Following a frenzy of media activity, bird flu discussions have somewhat subsided. This is a short summary of the situation on the ground in several countries.

The total numbers of H5 outbreaks in poultry in 16 countries since the start of the pandemic in Dec 2003, are shown in a graph on OIE web-site:

<<http://oie.int/download/AVIAN%20INFLUENZA/graph%20HPAI%2001122005.pdf>>.

Europe

New bird flu cases have been reported in Romania, where new avian influenza outbreaks have been confirmed by Bucharest laboratory analyses in the villages of Dudescu and Bumbacari, both in Braila county. The villages are now quarantined, the villagers are going to be vaccinated (human flu A vaccine), and have accepted having their fowl killed and incinerated.

There were also outbreaks on the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine, where reportedly 1,500 birds died, and the Ukrainian government declared the state of emergency.

Many EU Member States continue a ban on outdoor keeping of poultry. In some regions, farmers can set up 'structures' with nets, fences and sometimes roofs allowing complete separation of commercially held poultry and wild birds. However, the Netherlands has announced it might lift the ban on outdoor poultry soon, as the migratory season for birds has ended.

In some countries, governments call upon owners of pet birds in certain regions to keep their animals indoors.

The European Commission allows EU Member States to vaccinated zoo animals against H5N1 bird flu. Further discussions are taking place on the possible vaccination of pet birds and outdoor poultry.

Meanwhile the European Commission might want to introduce a maximum period following the date of entry of the measures forcing farmers to shield their birds from wild birds, after which consumers should be told about the fact that products have been obtained from outdoor or organic poultry that temporarily had no access to open-air run.

During a discussion about a new EU-directive on the prevention of bird flu, the European Parliament adopted a number of amendments in favour of vaccination against bird flu and discrimination against products obtained from vaccinated animals. It remains to be seen if the European Council of Agricultural ministers will take the Parliament's advises on board, when they finally adopt the new directive during their December meeting.

Middle East & Africa

Zimbabwe reported a suspicion of H5 bird flu on 28 November, the neuraminidase type is still to be determined.

A TV report on the Avian influenza surveillance activities in Kenya, showing the sampling of wild ducks in Lake Elmenteita, the Rift valley, was shown by BBC World News on 2 Dec 2005. Accessible at http://news.bbc.co.uk/nolavconsole/ukfs_news/hi/newsid_4490000/newsid_4490800/nbrm_4490878.stm

Morocco and neighbour Algeria have drawn up plans to combat the spread of bird flu which experts believe could arrive in North Africa within months. The main threat is seen as coming early in 2006, when migratory birds return from other parts of the continent.

Authorities in Ethiopia are testing hundreds of dead birds in the country's east for a possible outbreak of bird flu. Ethiopian scientists have travelled to the region near the country's border with Somalia to test dead pigeons for a possible outbreak of avian flu. Nothing has been confirmed yet.

Asia

Fresh reports about outbreaks in birds are still coming in from mainland China and Vietnam. Human cases have been reported in Indonesia, Vietnam and China.

Indonesian authorities have confirmed that bird flu had been found in 23 of Indonesia's 33 provinces.

In China, outbreaks cover significant distances -- from Xinjiang autonomous region in the extreme northwest to Hunan province, which borders Guangdong province in the southeast.

For maps see:

<<http://www.flu.org.cn/map/MapBrowser.aspx?reportId=18>>

<<http://poultrymed.com/files/index.html>>

These seem to be small isolated cases which the Chinese authorities appear to be having excellent success in stamping out quickly and preventing clusters of disease. However, a Japanese scientist, the right vaccines) up in around 5 days with disease. that a policy of one-size-fits-all, for example, to start using biofilm Masato Tashiro, reported many more human casualties in China than Chinese authorities have reported so far, including 7 human to human cases.

Thailand, however, declared itself free from bird flu after going without new outbreaks for 21 days. The 2 latest confirmed cases of human bird flu in Thailand might be [the result of] human-to-human transmission, a senior health official has said.

China and Vietnam have followed Hong Kong in a massive poultry vaccination programme, but apparently there have been problems with vaccine quality in both countries. Chinese authorities have arrested people suspected of selling fake bird flu vaccine. 9 companies are known to produce avian influenza bird vaccines.

The total officially registered number of cases throughout East Asia since December 2003 is now 134, and the death toll is now 69.

5. Americas

A low pathogenic strain of avian influenza has been found on a single turkey farm in Sampson County, North Carolina. According to Dow Jones Newswires, the strain was H3N3, which presents no threat to humans, and was confirmed by the National Veterinary Services Laboratory on 28 Nov 2005. Despite the virus being found on the farm, no birds were reported as ill. If low pathogenic avian influenza is detected in the USA, farms must be thoroughly "cleaned and disinfected", it is not known what happens to the birds,

6. Questions currently in (scientific) debate

The bird flu debate produces a number of uncertainties that science should help clear up. Here is a number of them, that may provide a good workout for your brain....

1. What is the role of wild (migratory) birds, travelling humans, trade in animals and animal products in the spread of bird flu? What is the contribution of shielding commercially held birds from wild (migratory) birds to the prevention of the spread of bird flu viruses?
2. In what way influence weather conditions the spread of bird flu and what would this mean for farmers? Would it be adviseable, for example, to start using biofilters to prevent ventilators sucking in dust particles contaminated with virus?
3. What are chances that Low Pathogenic Avian Influenza (LPAI) mutates into High Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI)? It there more risk in a flock of commercially held poultry than in wild birds (comparing groups of the same size)? (if yes, then it might be advisable to cull a flock of poultry with LPAI)
4. Does the risk of a bird flu virus mutating into a virus dangerous to animals and humans differ between the H5N1 strain and other subtypes of bird flu (like H7)?
5. Are there any other birds beyond waterfowl that could be carrier of bird flu, like sparrow?
6. Could there be any cross-immunisation between different strains of bird flu in birds, other animals and humans)?
7. How serious are chances that vaccinated poultry and other birds become silent carrier of bird flu? Would this stand in the way of a vaccination policy in the EU? Can an OIE accepted DIVA (Differentiating Infected from Vaccinated Animals) strategy be developed and, if yes, when could it become available?
8. It is possible to produce a commercial vaccine to be administred through feed and/or water (or as a spray)?
9. Could be speed up the working of vaccines. Current available vaccines need around 20 days for animals to build up sufficient immunity. This means that a policy of 'emergency vaccination' would probably not work in the vicinity of outbreaks like it might do around outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease, when (using the right vaccines) immunity can be build up in around 5 days.

Lastly: the big FAO/WHO/OIE conference on bird flu held in Geneva in October 2005, attended by 600 experts (but no farmers representatives?), ended with the following main conclusions:

Control at Source in Birds

- Improving veterinary services, emergency preparedness plans and control campaigns including culling, vaccination and compensation.
- Assisting countries to control avian influenza in animal populations.

Surveillance

- Strengthening early detection and rapid response systems for animal and human influenza.
- Building and strengthening laboratory capacity.

Rapid Containment

- Support and training for the investigation of animal and human cases and clusters, and planning and testing rapid containment activities.

Pandemic Preparedness

Building and testing national pandemic preparedness plans, conducting a global pandemic response exercise, strengthening the capacity of health systems, training clinicians and health managers.

Integrated Country Plans

- Developing integrated national plans across all sectors to provide the basis for coordinated technical and financial support.

Communications

- To support all of the above, factual and transparent communications, in particular risk communication, is vital.

The World Bank estimates that one billion dollar is needed to combat birdflu over the next three years.

The OIE stated that bird flu is still primarily an animal disease.

The FAO says it is technically possible to combat bird flu virus in poultry successfully within one year, by supporting the veterinary services and sufficiently compensating farmers. The flu should be controlled in poultry flocks. This is the key to the solution.

The WHO still states that it is only a matter of time before bird flu transforms into a human flu pandemic. "Once a pandemic virus appears, it will be too late"

There will be a follow up money "pledging" conference in Beijing on 16 and 17 January 2006. The World Bank hopes to raise US\$ 1bn there?..

yours faithfully

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