

Avian Influenza: Vaccination of certain poultry in France and Netherlands approved

Commission proposals to allow France and the Netherlands to carry out targeted preventive vaccination campaigns on poultry, as a precautionary measure against highly pathogenic avian influenza, have been backed by the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health today. The vaccination programmes are authorised only for specific birds in specified regions, and will be subject to rigorous surveillance and control requirements. These include movement restrictions, strict monitoring of vaccinated flocks to ensure that there is no undetected outbreak of avian influenza and careful record-keeping. Vaccinated poultry must also be able to be differentiated from poultry and birds with the avian influenza virus. This can be achieved through the DIVA (Differentiating between Infected and Vaccinated Animals) strategy (see MEMO/06/92). The Commission proposals to authorise the vaccination plans also lay out conditions and limits for the trade of the vaccinated birds and their products.

Markos Kyprianou, Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, said, "Recent cases of avian flu in wild birds in the EU have compounded the need to explore every possible option to protect our poultry from this virus. Targeted preventive vaccination, accompanied by sufficient guarantees, is allowed by the new avian influenza Directive and can be an effective tool when coupled with the rigorous preventive measures already in place in the EU. As the spring migration approaches, I would urge Member States to remain on high-alert for any signs of avian influenza, and to continue applying all of the precautionary measures we have laid down over the past months."

French ducks and geese

The French programme approved today entails the vaccination of ducks and geese in the departments of Landes, Loire-Atlantique and Vendée, which are considered to be areas at high risk of avian influenza. Vaccination was deemed necessary for the ducks and geese in these regions due to the fact that these birds cannot be easily put indoors and therefore their effective separation from potentially infected wild birds cannot be assured. Vaccination will begin immediately, and will be carried out until 1 April 2006, during which time around 900 000 birds are expected to be immunised against the H5N1 virus. The French plan outlines the monitoring and control measures that will be taken in relation to the vaccinated birds. These include a pre-vaccination examination of flocks to ensure health and bio-security standards are adequate, monthly clinical surveillance of the holdings, the use of sentinel birds (i.e. unvaccinated control birds) to monitor for an avian influenza outbreak in the vaccinated flock. Farmers will be provided with warning criteria to help them in detecting any possible outbreak of avian influenza in the vaccinated birds.

In addition to these measures outlined by the French, the Commission proposal lays down further conditions, particularly in relation to the movement of vaccinated poultry. Vaccinated live poultry, their hatching eggs and day-old chicks cannot be exported or moved to another Member State or third country. Within France, vaccinated birds can only be moved to other vaccinated holdings, to holdings where there is complete separation of vaccinated and non-vaccinated birds, or to a slaughterhouse for immediate slaughter. Fresh meat and meat products from the vaccinated poultry can be marketed in the EU and dispatched to third countries, provided that it comes from holdings which have complied with all the above conditions, the flock from which it originates is inspected by a vet 48 hours prior to slaughter, and it meets all appropriate animal health rules. The Commission proposal also requires that any packaging or means of transport used for vaccinated birds and their products is properly washed and disinfected.

Dutch hobby birds and free-range laying hens

The Dutch vaccination plan applies to hobby poultry and to free-range laying hens throughout the whole country. There are between 1-3 million hobby birds in the Netherlands, and around 5 million free-range laying hens. The vaccination will be provided on a voluntary basis, as an alternative to the requirement that these birds be kept indoors. All bio-security measures, such as the feeding of poultry under cover, will still have to be applied, regardless of whether owners opt for vaccination or not. Detailed surveillance and control provisions are outlined in the Dutch plan. Monitoring for an outbreak of avian influenza in the vaccinated flock will be done using sentinel birds and veterinary tests, vaccinated poultry will be distinguishable from non-vaccinated birds, records will be kept of all vaccinated holdings and bio-security measures will continue to be applied.

The Commission proposal agreed today reinforces the Dutch provisions for the movement of poultry and their products. Vaccinated hobby poultry will only be allowed to be moved to other vaccinated backyard holdings in the Netherlands subject to permission from the authorities. Movement of these birds to another Member State will require authorisation from both the Dutch authorities and the authorities of the recipient country. Meat and products from hobby poultry are not allowed to be commercially marketed anyway, so no additional provisions were needed for products from vaccinated hobby birds. Vaccinated free-range laying hens may only be moved to other vaccinated holdings or directly to a slaughterhouse within the Netherlands, and may not be dispatched outside the country. Eggs from vaccinated laying hens can be marketed in the EU and dispatched to third countries provided that they are shown to come from a disease-free holding and must be packed in disposable packaging in an officially designated centre, in line with required bio-security measures. Fresh meat and meat products from the vaccinated laying hens can be put on the market provided that it comes from holdings which have complied with all criteria, the flock from which it originates is inspected by a vet 48 hours prior to slaughter, and it meets general animal health rules.