

EU poultry producers disagree with vaccination plan

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EU's poultry industry disagrees with bloc's vaccination plan By Ahmed ElAmin

24/02/2006 – The EU's poultry association has joined in the criticism of the European Commission for approving the vaccination of poultry flocks in the Netherlands and France.

The association also responded to questions on reports of products being stockpiled as the public turns away from eating poultry and over plant safety for workers in the industry.

Cees Vermeeren, head of the Brussels office for the Association of Poultry Processors and Poultry Trade in the EU countries (AVEC) said the group believes that there are still a lot of questions to be answered with regard to vaccination.

"In our opinion it is far too early to introduce a vaccination programme," he told FoodProductionDaily.com today. "Vaccination requires firm additional measures on the farms since vaccinated poultry can still be infected without showing the symptoms. If the virus is masked (by vaccination) it will create the situation we all want to prevent — making the virus endemic."

AVEC's position received support yesterday after Joe Brownlie, a professor at the UK's Royal Veterinary College, said that France and the Netherlands' decisions to vaccinate was "premature".

"To vaccinate the entire domestic stock would be premature because the current vaccine is not highly effective at reducing infection with avian influenza – and may complicate clinical diagnosis," Brownlie stated. "Where possible chickens and other poultry should be moved inside where it can be done humanely and there is room in buildings to keep them comfortably." When chickens cannot be kept inside they should be monitored carefully outside until a solution is found, he said.

"It is not necessary to slaughter large numbers of chickens simply because they cannot be housed inside," he said. "From the evidence we have at the moment it is not if bird flu arrives – but when – and it is most likely to be from migrating wild fowl such as swans or ducks."

The EU's controversial approval of decisions by France and the Netherlands' to start vaccinating their poultry highlights the fault lines in the bloc's response to avian influenza.

AVEC's Vermeeren also responded to questions about what the industry is doing about all the surplus poultry that is being stockpiled.

He said poultry producers are attempting to market the product in the best way.

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"But the first objective is to maintain or regain consumer confidence with regard to poultry meat," he said. "The main message is that poultry is officially inspected twice so before the meat can be marketed. So poultry meat is safe just cook it."

In terms of protection for poultry workers he said that their safety is maintained as poultry is inspected twice, once before it arrives at the slaughterhouse or just before slaughter and secondly at the slaughter line.

"So the risk that infected poultry arrives in the slaughterhouse is negligible," he said. "Of course the slaughter process is executed as hygienically as possible. I do know employers have promoted that employees of slaughterhouses have been vaccinated against influenza."

The Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health, a body made up of national veterinary experts from the 25 EU member states, gave its approval this week to the limited vaccination programmes proposed by France and the Netherlands.

The approval was opposed by Germany, Austria, Denmark and Portugal, while the UK said vaccination could mask the disease in poultry flocks, helping to spread it further.

In a published statement the UK's deputy chief veterinary officer, Fred Landeg, said that the priority of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is to ensure that the country is able to eradicate avian influenza as swiftly and effectively as possible.

"Vaccination offers potential benefits but currently available vaccines are too limited to provide a general solution," he stated. "Crucially, though these vaccines protect against disease, they will not prevent birds from becoming infected and shedding virus. Because the symptoms of disease would be masked, the hidden presence of disease would pose a serious problem."

Current vaccines on the market also have severe practical limitations in that they need to be delivered by individually injecting each bird. It can take up to three weeks for the birds to develop optimum protective immunity and some poultry require two doses, he said.

Early detection and slaughter of infected birds and dangerous contacts, and the imposition of movement controls around the infected premises, provide the most effective method of blocking the spread of bird flu, he said.

While admitting the problems with vaccination, the European Commission yesterday defended the standing committee's decision.

"Vaccination reduces the risk of birds becoming infected with the avian influenza virus, and lowers the chances of the virus being introduced into a vaccinated holding, as a higher amount of the virus is needed before a vaccinated bird will become infected," the Commission stated in a memo.

"Vaccination also reduces the amount of the virus shed in the environment by a bird if it does become infected with avian flu, thereby helping to lower the risk of the disease spreading."

A vaccinated flock is less likely to have an outbreak of avian influenza than a non-vaccinated flock, and if an outbreak of the disease does occur it is slower to spread and easier to contain and eradicate in a vaccinated flock, the Commission stated.

The EU's new Avian Influenza Directive, adopted in December 2005, allows members to carry out preventive vaccination against avian flu. Although the new Avian Influenza Directive does not have to be implemented by Member States until July 31 2007, it entered into force in February 2005.

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Therefore, national authorities

Restricted vaccination programmes can now begin immediately in the two countries. Other countries must first gain similar approval to being their programmes.

France applied to vaccinate 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 about 900,000 birds are expected to be immunised against the H5N1 virus.

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 it comes from approved holdings. The flock from which the meat originates must have been inspected by a vet 48 hours prior to slaughter.

The Commission proposal also requires that any packaging or means of transport used for vaccinated birds and their products is properly washed and disinfected.

The Dutch vaccination plan applies to hobby poultry and to free-range laying hens throughout the whole country. The Netherlands has between one to three million hobby birds and about five million free-range laying hens.

The Commission also said the decision endorsed the Dutch proposal on 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 the restricted birds to another member will require authorisation from both the Dutch authorities and the authorities of the recipient country.

Meanwhile the UK's Soil Association disagrees with Defra's approach. The body calling for the government to consider 'ring-fence' vaccination as part of the control strategy in the event of any outbreak of avian influenza in the UK.

The EU position on vaccination is the method of control endorsed by both the UN Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the Soil Association stated.

The Soil Association also said that unlike other EU countries, such as Spain, the UK has no stockpiles of appropriate vaccine.

"Urgent action is needed, given the potential for an imminent outbreak and the fact that it will take at least three months to produce sufficient stocks of vaccine and to train people to administer it to birds effectively

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and humanely," the association stated.

Poultry workers are at risk from catching the virus, the association noted. While catching the virus from live birds is possible, the likelihood is very low.

The risk is high when infected birds are slaughtered, as fine particles of blood, mucus and faeces are sprayed through the air.

Handling an infected carcass or getting infected blood on hands would bring a worker into direct contact with the virus. It could then enter the body through a cut in your skin or for example if a finger is put in the mouth.

The UK government is currently discussing what action to take in case of an outbreak. The Soil Association is against bringing birds inside as this would destroy the free-range and organic segments.

"Permanent indoor housing provides ideal conditions for spreading any disease, not just avian flu, and so requiring the use of in-feed antibiotics – already linked to negative human health impacts," the association stated. "It would also be a huge backwards step in the progress we have made in developing free range and organic farms in this country and the great health and animal welfare benefits that these systems deliver."

The EU's decision followed two days of talks on a strategy to contain the spread of the disease, now present in eight EU countries. EU's poultry industry disagrees with bloc's vaccination plan

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