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THE DIRECTOR GENERAL

Afssa – Mandate no. 2007-SA-0041

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OPINION

of the French Food Safety Agency on the development of an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 in the United Kingdom and assessment of the situation and risk so as to determine measures to be taken in France

Review of mandates

Following the confirmation of a first outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 virus in a turkey farm in the United Kingdom, the French Food Safety Agency (Afssa) was jointly requested on 3 February 2007 by the Ministry of Health and Solidarity and the Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries to assess the situation and risk in order to determine the measures to be applied in France in compliance with risk scale proposed in the Afssa opinion of 12 September 2006.

Opinion of the “avian influenza” emergency joint group

The “avian influenza” emergency joint expert group met on 5 February 2007 through a teleconference and produced the following opinion:

Context and review of previous mandates

- Cases of infection by the HP avian influenza H5N1 virus occurred in the European wild bird population from the autumn of 2005 to the spring of 2006 and affected more than half of the member states of the Union including France. Sporadic outbreaks were identified in France in five member states (France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Hungary) between February and June 2006 in areas in which the wild population was infected. The last case of HP AI H5N1 in the EU was confirmed on 4 August 2006 in a captive swan in Germany.
- The HP-Virus H5N1 was also detected during the summer of 2006 in Siberia in backyard holdings of the Altaj, Tomsk, Omsk and Novosibirsk regions and in wild birds in the Omsk region (south-western Siberia). Since then, three domestic outbreaks were reported (but not confirmed officially) in January 2007 in Russia, in backyard poultry in the Krasnodar¹ region close to the Black Sea, after the end of the wild birds autumn migration from countries in the North of the European continent, which is of major importance in the epidemiology of the influenza.

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REPUBLIC OF FRANCE

- On 23 January, identification of a highly pathogenic avian influenza virus, subtype H5N1, in a commercial farm (3300 breeding geese) in Hungary represented the first case of highly pathogenic avian influenza in the European Union since August 2006. The initial investigation into the index case also identified a second suspected farm (confirmed by DG SANCO) located 8 km from the first outbreak. This was described in an Afssa opinion² on 31 January 2007.
- Since then, an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 was confirmed on 3rd February in a commercial farm of 160,000 turkeys at Holton in Suffolk (South-East of England). Further tests established that this virus belonged to the Asiatic line and was “identical” to the virus isolated ten days earlier in Hungary.
- An Afssa opinion³ published on 12 September 2006 proposed a grid establishing a scale of risk to which captive birds on the mainland are exposed which was divided into six levels depending on the presence of highly pathogenic avian influenza cases in the wild bird population, (i) in the leaving areas, (ii) in the migratory corridors for wild birds temporarily resident in France and (iii) in France. This stated, however that “the use of this grid should be preceded systematically by a critical evaluation of the information available in order to avoid any differences between an actual and a predicted situation”.

Questions raised

This involves assessing:

- the consequences on France of the development of a domestic outbreak of avian influenza H5N1 which occurred in a turkey farm in the United Kingdom at the end of January 2001
- the possible change in the risk to which captive birds in mainland France are exposed according to the assessment grid proposed in the opinion of 12 September 2006.

Method

The joint expert review was conducted by the emergency joint expert group on “Avian influenza” based on a draft opinion which was discussed and confirmed on 5 February 2007.

The expert review was conducted from the following documents:

- the OIE health warnings and AFP and Promed despatches up to midday on 5 February 2007;
- passive surveillance data on bird deaths in France up to the end of week 52 (source: DGAI);
- the risk assessment for the United Kingdom conducted by DEFRA on 24 January 2007 following the detection of the first Hungarian case;
- successive communiqués from DEFRA on the outbreak identified in a turkey farm in Suffolk.

² Opinion 2007-SA-0031 of 31 January 2007 from the French Food Safety Agency dated 31 January 2007 on the development of outbreaks of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in Hungary and in Russia and the reassessment of risk of the virus being introduced by wild birds in France.

³ Opinion 2006-SA-0241 of 12 September 2006 from the French Food Safety Agency dated 12 September 2007 on the assessment of the level of risk of contamination by the highly pathogenic influenza virus from wild birds to which captive birds in mainland France are exposed and measures to be taken according to a risk scale.

Discussion

The outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza characterised on 03 February in a farm of 160,000 turkeys in Upper Holton (Suffolk, Great Britain) was associated with a highly pathogenic influenza virus H5N1, the preliminary H5 gene sequencing of which obtained by the Reference Community Laboratory appears to suggest that it is identical to the virus from the Hungarian index case, which itself was very similar to the viruses detected in central Europe during the winter and spring of 2006.

One single case of H5N1 virus infection was declared in the United Kingdom, in April 2006 in a wild swan (Whooper swan, *Cygnus cygnus* in Scotland, i.e. more than 300 kilometres from the new outbreak) despite a targeted surveillance programme on wild bird deaths (5 species targeted) set up in 2006 in different regions including Suffolk.

Only one case of infection in the wild bird population by another AI virus (H7N3 LP) was identified in May 2006 in Suffolk.

Following the declaration of the Hungarian case, DEFRA drew attention in a risk assessment published on 24 January 2007 to the possible geographical extension of avian influenza and concluded from this that the United Kingdom was at increased risk from bird migration, commercial activities and from movement of persons. According to this report, no poultry or poultry products had been imported legally from Hungary for three months. The risk of H5N1 influenza virus being introduced by legal commercial activities was therefore considered to be negligible. According to this report the direct introduction of the virus through migratory birds from Hungary appeared to be unlikely.

In view of the information summarised above the situation of the British outbreak is very different from that of the Hungarian outbreak. The hypotheses put forward in the Afssa opinion² of 31 January 2007 to explain the introduction of the virus in the Hungarian farm, i.e. migratory or other movements of wild birds or persistence of the virus in the surrounding biotope appeared to be very unlikely in this case although they cannot be entirely excluded in the absence of results from an epidemiological investigation which is probably currently underway in the British outbreak.

In view of the size and purpose of the farm, the origin of the virus probably lies in the introduction of domestic birds and/or fomites (bedding, cages, vehicles, movement of personnel, etc.) as was classically recognised in the previous highly pathogenic avian influenza episodes in Europe (H7N1 in Northern Italy and H7N7 in Benelux) whether or not due to legal activities.

In this setting, the immediate risk which this outbreak poses to France and all of the Member states of the EU depends mostly on the ability of the British Authorities to control it, as this will determine the ability to control the circulation of the H5N1 virus both in farmed birds and in the local wild bird population (particularly aquatic). The experts considered that the likelihood of wild birds moving from Great Britain to France is currently very low. Infection of the wild bird population associated with sudden changes in weather which could promote erratic non-migratory movements would be a more worrying signal for progression of the British situation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this setting and in view of the information available, GECU considers, consistently with its opinion of 12 September, 2006³ that the current level of risk to France should be increased from 1b to 2a although no cases have been recognised in the wild bird population. The new measures linked to level 2a, particularly increased active and passive surveillance of wild bird deaths and the prohibition of the transport of decoy birds, particularly as the hunting season has been closed since 31 January 2007, must be applied rigorously. In the same spirit, biosafety measures and measures of control of domestic bird movements should be applied as stated in the regulations.

Any indications of a worsening in the situation in Great Britain in the days and weeks to come such as development of cases in the wild population or in farms should result in the level of risk being re-assessed.

The group emphasises the importance of rapid communication of information from epidemiological surveillance and the utility of surveillance of wild bird deaths to assess the situation in France and neighbouring countries².

Key words: Avian influenza, wild bird population, domestic bird population, United Kingdom

Opinion of the French Food Safety Agency

The analytical information available enables Afssa to provide a response to the mandate received on 3 February 2007 from the Ministry for Health and Solidarity and from the Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries following the confirmation of a first outbreak of highly pathogenic Avian influenza virus H5N1 in a turkey farm in the United Kingdom with a view to assess the situation and the level of risk in order to determine the measures to be applied in France in accordance with the risk scale proposed in the Afssa opinion of 12 September 2006.

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