

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

Date: January 19, 2022

Report Number: UK2022-0004

Report Name: H5N1 Avian Influenza Continues in UK and First Human Case Reported

Country: United Kingdom

Post: London

Report Category: Agricultural Situation, Pest/Disease Occurrences, Poultry and Products

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Report Highlights:

The United Kingdom (UK) is currently experiencing a significant outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Having entered the UK via the wild migratory bird population in October 2021, it has now spread to commercial poultry flocks. As of January 18, 2022, there are 68 cases in England, five in Scotland, three in Wales, and five in Northern Ireland. This compares with just 26 infected premises over the entirety of the 2020-21 winter season. On January 6, the UK Health Security Agency (HSA) confirmed a case of bird-to-human transmission but advised the risk to the wider public from avian influenza continues to be very low.

Executive Summary

As with many of its European neighbors, the introduction of HPAI by migrating wild birds has become a perennial issue for the UK over the past 15 years. The birds go to the north of Russia for the summer where they mix with others, and the virus spreads, before returning to Europe in the winter. They then infect the domestic wild bird population, as well as kept birds and commercial poultry.

According to Chief Veterinary Officer, Christine Middlemiss, at the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), the UK has been experiencing a higher level of virus every two to three years in the migratory wild bird population, revealed by routine surveillance (of dead wild birds submitted via public reports and warden patrols) that provides an early warning of the risk of an outbreak. That then translates into infection in kept poultry, be that backyard poultry, animal sanctuaries, and sometimes commercial farms.

This winter, 2021-22, the UK is facing a significant outbreak of the virus, in this instance with the H5N1 variant. As of January 18, 2022, there are 68 cases in England, five in Scotland, three in Wales, and five in Northern Ireland. This compares with just 26 infected premises over the entirety of the 2020-21 winter season. While the numbers are large for the UK, they remain significantly below the near 300 confirmed cases currently being reported in Italy, as well as large outbreaks elsewhere in Europe.

The impact of the virus is largely economic and can be very serious for individual keepers and companies. Commercially, the UK is primarily a producer of broilers, and to a much lesser extent turkeys and ducks. While commercial cases are being reported, thus far the disease has not affected any of the UK's larger poultry establishments, a production site in Northern Ireland where 22,100 ducks were culled in December being the most significant. Indeed, broiler production in CY2022 is currently up year-on-year, supported by strong domestic demand. Necessarily, the sector is wary of any cases in the larger establishments and, to avoid the cost and disruption of any infection, has voluntarily tightened its already strict biosecurity protocols over and above those imposed by Her Majesty's Government (HMG).

For those who keep backyard flocks it can also be very distressing as, once infection is confirmed, Defra culls the remaining birds and cleanses and disinfects the premises to limit spread as they do in commercial enterprises. After each confirmed case of HPAI, the UK also enforces a three-kilometer Protection Zone and ten-kilometer Surveillance Zone around the premises.

This is over and above the Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ) requirements that came into force across Great Britain (England, Wales, and Scotland) on the November 3, 2021, and in Northern Ireland on November 17, 2021, as the severity of the situation became clear. The AIPZ means that bird keepers must:

- house or net all poultry and captive birds to keep them separate from wild birds
- cleanse and disinfect clothing, footwear, equipment, and vehicles before and after contact with poultry and captive birds – if practical, use disposable protective clothing

- reduce the movement of people, vehicles, or equipment to and from areas where poultry and captive birds are kept, to minimize contamination from manure, slurry, and other products, and use effective vermin control
- thoroughly cleanse and disinfect housing on a continuous basis
- keep fresh disinfectant at the right concentration at all farm and poultry housing entry and exit points
- minimize direct and indirect contact between poultry and captive birds and wild birds, including making sure all feed and water is not accessible to wild birds

The AIPZ was further extended on November 29 to include housing measures across the UK, legally requiring all bird keepers across the UK (whether they have pet birds, commercial flocks or just a few birds in a backyard flock) to keep their birds indoors.

The UK continues to react quickly to the spread of H5N1, implementing containment measures and investigations into the sources of the outbreaks, and informing international partners. There is limited trade in live birds, both commercial and as pets, to the United States, and UK authorities have affirmed that Export Health Certificates between the UK and the United States are considered and issued on a case-by-case basis. They will be certified by an Official Veterinarian only if the consignment meets the requirements set out in the Export Health Certificates in full.

In a further development, on January 6, the UK Health Security Agency (HSA) confirmed a case of bird-to-human transmission. According to the HSA, the person acquired the infection from very close, regular contact with many infected birds, which they kept in and around their home over a prolonged period. All contacts of the individual, including those who visited the premises, have been traced and there is no evidence of onward spread of the infection to anyone else. The individual is currently well and self-isolating. While the HSA has indicated the risk to the wider public from avian influenza continues to be very low, they have reiterated their advice that people do not touch sick or dead birds.

While there have been human cases of avian influenza in the UK previously, this is the first human case of this strain in the UK but there have been cases elsewhere globally. In the context of the ongoing Covid pandemic, and it being the peak of influenza season, Professor Isabel Oliver, Chief Scientific Officer at the HSA stated, “Currently there is no evidence that this strain detected in the UK can spread from person to person, but we know that viruses evolve all the time, and we continue to monitor the situation closely”.

Attachments:

No Attachments.