UNEP

CMS

CONVENTION ON MIGRATORY SPECIES

Distribution: General

UNEP/CMS/Conf.10.42a
17 October 2011

Original: English

TENTH MEETING OF THE
CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES
Bergen, 20-25 November 2011
Agenda Item 19

H5N1 HIGHLY PATHOGENIC AVIAN INFLUENZA: SITUATION UPDATE OCTOBER 2011

(Prepared by the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds)

Background

1. Since emerging in 1997 and re-emerging in 2003, H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) has had great socio-economic impacts killing poultry across Asia, Africa and Europe, and causing over 560 confirmed human infections with over 300 resultant deaths. Conservation impacts include direct mortality of birds and indirect impacts such as negative perception of wild birds leading to them being killed and their habitats destroyed.

2. It is widely accepted that infection is spread primarily through the movement and trade of poultry and poultry products locally, nationally and internationally - all human mediated activities. Infection can also be spread through the pet bird trade, wild bird trade including release of traded wild birds, the farming of wild birds and wild bird movements. The relative importance of these routes is often difficult to determine (and will differ by situation, location and time period).

3. Cases of H5N1 HPAI peaked in 2006 and outbreaks declined until mid 2008. Since that time the number of outbreaks has been increasing slightly. Some 63 countries have been affected, the disease being considered endemic in some of them. Although the geographical spread of infection has not changed significantly, the disease has re-occurred in countries that have been apparently free of it for some time.

Recent Developments

4. Influenza viruses including H5N1 HPAI mutate and re-assort over time and there are now a number of strains of the virus across the world. In 2011 a new strain (within the 2.3.2.1 clade) emerged and caused poultry mortality in Viet Nam and China. Current vaccines are not considered to be entirely effective against this strain.

5. Both in response to the increase in global cases of H5N1 HPAI and the emergence of the new strain, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations warned the global community of the need to maintain a heightened state of readiness and surveillance.

6. The recent Hollywood film *Contagion* is also creating a resurgence in media interest in the impacts of a pandemic viral disease (although not in this case avian influenza specifically). It is thus a timely reminder for relevant organizations' public relations personnel to continue to be well briefed on issues of wildlife disease, so as to be able to respond to public concerns with sound factual information.

Role of Wild Birds

7. Wild birds can be seen as both victims and vectors of the disease and it is likely that viruses are exchanged between poultry and wild birds, in both directions. In cases where the virus spills over from agricultural settings into the wild bird population, wild birds can die in small numbers or at a large-scale, as was the case at Lake Qinghai, China in 2005 where more than 6,000 wild birds died.

8. Despite repeated claims that wild birds are responsible for the long-distance spread of infection, extensive live bird surveillance and research has found no 'reservoir' of infection in wild birds. In effect no 'smoking gun' has been found. Wild birds have undoubtedly been involved in spreading the disease to some extent but research based on known bird movements and ecology, and the nature of the infection, suggests that the likelihood of persistent, repeated long-distance spread is very low. Information from experimental laboratory trials suggests that wild birds may be temporary vectors or periodic short-term spreaders of this virus. This would account for why outbreaks in wild birds have been apparently self-limiting i.e. the infection does not seem to persist to any great extent. This was seen in the European outbreaks in 2006 and 2007.

9. The Task Force therefore considers that wild birds are disproportionally blamed for the spread of infection. Whilst this may have conservation implications, more importantly it can be diversionary (encouraging inappropriate responses that concentrate on wild birds rather than poultry bio-security and trade issues) and thus does not aid countries in controlling the disease.

10. The new strain within the 2.3.2.1 clade is no more associated with being spread by wild birds than any other prevalent strain.

Work of the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds

11. The Task Force continues to work on reviewing the role of wild birds in this disease and the impact of the disease on wild birds, promoting a balanced opinion based on currently available evidence.

Key messages

12. H5N1 HPAI remains a significant threat to human, domestic and wild animal health, national economies, livelihoods and conservation.

13. The increase in cases of H5N1 HPAI has prompted renewed warnings of the importance of heightened readiness and surveillance.

14. Wild birds can be seen as both victims and occasional vectors of the disease – there is often disproportional blame in the media and elsewhere attributed to wild birds for spreading the infection.

15. Despite extensive surveillance of live birds, no obvious reservoir of infection has been found in wild birds.

16. The new strain within the 2.3.2.1 clade is no more associated with being spread by wild birds than any other prevalent strains.

17. Further surveillance in domestic poultry and wild birds is required to monitor the situation globally and to direct and focus response measures.

18. Rapid communication of news of outbreaks and results of surveillance is needed to support fact-based decision making.

Action requested:

The Conference of the Parties is invited to:

a. Take note of the update; and

b. Consider the advice of the Scientific Council in relation with avian influenza and migratory birds.