



Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds statement on:

H5N8 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in poultry and wild birds in Republic of Korea January 2014

KEY MESSAGES

1. *Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) outbreaks are most frequently associated with domestic poultry production systems and value chains.*
2. *H5N8 HPAI virus has recently emerged in domestic poultry in the Republic of Korea and has caused mortality of domestic poultry and wild birds.*
3. *As well as impact on the poultry industry, there is the potential for significant mortality of wild birds most notably in large flocks of Baikal teal.*
4. *There is currently no evidence that wild birds are the source of this virus and they should be considered victims not vectors.*
5. *The Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds, co-convened by the United Nations Environment Programme/ Convention on Migratory Species (UNEP/CMS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) urges agencies and organisations to:*
 - a. *conduct thorough epidemiological evaluation to determine the true source of the virus and mechanisms of transmission among domestic and wild birds;*
 - b. *regardless of the source of infection, focus disease control actions on the affected farms with the aim of minimising risk of disease spread to other poultry farms and/or wildlife;*
 - c. *ensure that affected and nearby farms are biosecure to prevent wildlife-poultry contact; and*
 - d. *recognise that focussing attention on wild birds can misdirect critical resources away from effective disease control and result in negative conservation outcomes and loss of biodiversity.*

Current situation

The Republic of Korea reported its first of a number of outbreaks of H5N8 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) at a duck farm in Gochang, Jeolla Province, 300 kilometers southwest of Seoul, on 16 January, 2014. Following these outbreaks a number of wild birds have been reported as having died from the infection. Dozens of [Baikal teal](#) (*Anas formosa*) and a smaller number of bean geese (*Anser fabilis*) have died to date, some of which have tested positive for the virus. The H5N8 strain of influenza has since been identified on at least 17 other farms, with tests currently under way for many other suspected cases. Over 640,000 poultry have already been slaughtered, with many hundreds of thousands more set to be destroyed.

Where has the virus come from?

To date, global wild bird surveillance efforts have never detected this strain of avian influenza virus in wild birds. Investigations are underway to try to determine the source of the virus associated with this event. Although a number of people have speculated that the virus has been spread from wild birds, this assertion is not supported by epidemiological evidence to date. As the virus has been

shown to cause mortality in the wild bean geese and Baikal teal, and the teal roost in dense flocks of tens to hundreds of thousands of birds, it would be expected that much higher mortality would have already occurred had the virus been circulating within these flocks during the winter. The migratory Baikal teal arrived in the Republic of Korea in the autumn of 2013 yet showed no evidence of disease until the farm outbreaks began. Detecting HPAI viruses in wild birds is extremely rare compared with detections in domestic poultry at farms and along poultry value chains where it is believed that low pathogenic viruses have the opportunity to evolve through mutations into highly virulent forms, become established, and spread rapidly. Movements of poultry, poultry products, people and equipment at, and between, the currently affected farms and spill-over of waste material into the wider environment can also facilitate spread of the virus to other domestic and wild birds.

What actions should be taken?

Poultry farms and markets

In accordance with FAO and OIE guidance, most H5N8 disease control measures implemented should focus on the poultry farms and bird markets including quarantine, stamping out, strict biosecurity, cleaning and disinfection, and trade and movement restrictions. If conducted properly, these steps help control outbreaks and work successfully to prevent spread of virus.

Wild birds

The Republic of Korea provides the main wintering grounds for Baikal teal and the enormous flocks of these chattering colourful birds provide a world famous wildlife spectacle. There is currently potential for high levels of mortality amongst these birds and other wildlife. To protect the wild birds and prevent them being involved in onward spread of virus, all efforts should be taken at the poultry farms and during disease control operations to try to reduce environmental contamination and risks to wild birds, particularly in wetland areas.

Measures should be taken to keep wild birds from the infected farms e.g. reducing any attractants such as food, and, where appropriate, increasing deterrents such as scaring devices (e.g. flags) in the immediate vicinity of affected farms. Away from affected farms, disturbance to wild birds should be minimised to allow them to remain and feed in these lower risk areas.

Killing wild birds should not be considered as a control measure, as this is diversionary, impractical, inefficient and contrary to the advice of all the major animal health agencies. Such measures are also contrary to conservation commitments under both the Convention on Migratory Species and Ramsar Convention and may result in international treaty violations. Similarly, applying disinfectants to the natural environment (e.g. to wetlands) is not advisable, as this is unlikely to be effective against the virus and can harm wildlife and fisheries.

Disproportionately blaming wild birds for the introduction and spread of the virus, as has happened during previous outbreaks of H5N1 HPAI, can lead to less focused disease control activities and potential spread of virus. The media, academics and human and animal health agencies are requested to act responsibly when considering the role of wild birds and avian influenza, and avoid implication of them as the source of the virus if the evidence does not support this.

The Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds

The United Nations Environment Programme/Convention on Migratory Species (UNEP/CMS) and Food and Agriculture Organization Co-convened Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds was established in 2005 and works as a communication and coordination network and continues to review the role of wild birds in the epidemiology of AI and the impact of the disease on wild birds, promoting a balanced opinion based on currently available evidence. Task Force members and/or observers include WHO, OIE, FAO, CMS, Ramsar Convention, AEWA, Wetlands International, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Birdlife International, Royal Veterinary College, Ecohealth Alliance and International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation.

FURTHER INFORMATION

East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership

<http://www.eaaflyway.net/wild-migratory-waterbirds-are-the-victims-of-bird-flu-not-the-cause/>

Ramsar Convention

Ramsar's Handbook on avian influenza and wetlands provides a major source of information, including a risk assessment for wetland managers and dealing with the media.

<http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/lib/hbk4-04.pdf>

The Ramsar Wetland Disease Manual provides specific practical guidance on preventing and controlling avian influenza and a range of other wetland-related disease issues.

<http://www.wwt.org.uk/rwdm>

http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-pubs-reports/main/ramsar/1-30-99_4000_0

Multilateral Environmental Agreements from Ramsar Convention, Convention on Migratory Species and the Africa Eurasian Waterbird Agreement

http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/res/key_res_x_21_e.pdf

http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/res/key_res_ix_23_e.pdf

<http://www.cms.int>

http://www.cms.int/bodies/COP/cop9/Report%20COP9/Res&Recs/E/Res_9_08_Wildlife_Disease_En.pdf

http://www.cms.int/bodies/COP/cop8/documents/proceedings/pdf/eng/CP8Res_8_27_Avian_Influenza_eng_rev.pdf

http://www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/en/mop/mop4_docs/final_res_pdf/res4_15_responding_threat_ai_final.pdf