

Brussels, 20. 07. 2006  
D(2006) 1243

Dear Dr. Lucas,

Thank you for your letter of 2 May 2006 concerning the role of intensive poultry farming and trade in the spread of avian flu.

The Commission is looking at the facts and the scientific evidence available on this disease in a very objective manner, as this is the only way to respond to the problems posed by this virus, in the interest of the protection of human health.

May I firstly point out that evidence shows that the majority of outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 in the EU have been caused by wild birds rather than poultry farming and trade.

As you know, the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus of the "Asian lineage" spread dramatically from south-East Asia in 2005 and since then has affected Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa, causing major concern throughout the world. The hypothesis that wild birds were contributing to the dissemination of the virus over long distances was first advanced in mid-2005. However, at that time scientists were split on this issue and there was little scientific evidence for or against this hypothesis.

In early 2006 many outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 occurred in the EU. In the framework of the surveillance programmes implemented in the Member States with the financial support of the Commission, 741 cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza (most of them confirmed as H5N1) were detected in wild birds in 13 Member States<sup>1</sup> between February and 21 May 2006. The peak in terms of the number of cases in wild birds was reached in March with 362 cases (compared to 200 in February), with cases declining to 162 in April and 17 in May. As anticipated above, the most commonly affected wild birds have been swans, representing 62.8% of the total, followed by ducks (16.3%), geese (4.5%), birds of prey (3.9%) and others (13%). The data gathered by the Commission and the Member States have also clearly shown that the disease actually entered the EU due to migration of birds from eastern Europe, and that wild birds are indeed capable of disseminating the virus over long distance.

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<sup>1</sup> Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, France, Slovakia, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Czech Republic and the UK

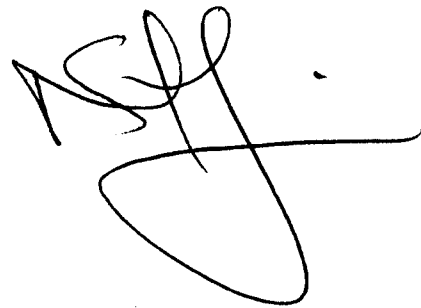
In the same period there were only four outbreaks of H5N1 avian influenza in poultry in the EU, in France, Germany, Sweden and Denmark, which were swiftly eradicated. Also in this case, however, all epidemiological data available strongly suggest that these outbreaks were caused by wild birds. These and other data can be found on the website of the recent FAO/OIE International Scientific Conference on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds held in Rome on 30 and 31 May 2006, at which they were presented<sup>1</sup>.

There are many aspects of the epidemiology of this virus both in wild birds and poultry, however, which need to be clarified. In the most recent outbreak in ducks and geese poultry farms in Hungary (June 2006), it would appear that both wild birds and other factors have probably contributed to virus spread. It should be pointed out, nonetheless, that good animal welfare standards are no doubt conducive to a better management and protection of animal health. The proposal for a directive on the protection of chickens kept for meat production, for example, which primarily serves animal welfare purposes, should also be viewed from this angle.

I am also fully aware that outside the EU trade in poultry and poultry products has also caused major spread of the H5N1 virus. For these reasons the Commission has worked very closely with the Member States to ensure on the one hand that the most rigorous measures, including measures on trade, are in place to prevent the virus entering poultry farms and, on the other hand, that intensified surveillance and research on these topics leads to further information on the dimension of the problem posed by wild birds, which unfortunately is a real one. You can find a very large amount of information on these topics on the Commission's web site.

This approach is further supported by the recent opinions on these issues from the Scientific Panel on animal health and welfare of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), which can be found on the EFSA website<sup>2</sup>.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/subjects/en/health/diseases/cards/conference/index\\_en.html](http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/subjects/en/health/diseases/cards/conference/index_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.efsa.eu.int/science/ahaw/ahaw\\_opinions/catindex\\_en.html](http://www.efsa.eu.int/science/ahaw/ahaw_opinions/catindex_en.html)