

DR. CAROLINE LUCAS

Green Party
for the South East of England

Debby Reynolds
Chief Veterinary Officer
DEFRA
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR

April 26th 2006

Dear Ms Reynolds,

I write to add my voice to those calling on the government to adopt measures to limit the impacts of an avian flu outbreak that are based on an understanding of the factors that cause the disease to develop and spread. Many experts believe that the current approach, based as it is on the assumption that H5N1 has evolved through the interaction of outdoor, free-range and backyard flocks with wild birds, which then act as a vector for the disease by spreading it as they migrate, is mistaken.

In the short term I believe that we must prevent avian flu spreading to poultry farms by culling any flocks that do become infected and vaccinating those nearby to contain the infection. I urge you to adopt this strategy as preferable to any pre-emptive culling of healthy poultry or closing down of the countryside. Ensuring that there are adequate supplies of vaccine to ring fence an outbreak of the disease is clearly central to such a strategy, so must be given top priority.

I would also like your reassurance that in the event of the disease spreading to poultry and birds, any culling required will be carried out swiftly, efficiently and humanely and in accordance with the UK and European Union slaughter legislation and World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) guidelines for emergency slaughter for disease control. This means that methods used to kill birds must not cause animal suffering - animals must be rendered unconscious immediately and remain unconscious until death.

In the longer term the government must seek to close the industrialised poultry farms that scientists are beginning to conclude are responsible for the mutation of a relatively harmless endemic poultry virus into the deadly HN51 strain in the first place. Any long term, large-scale move ordering free-range farmers to coop their birds up indoors will increase overcrowding and stress among poultry, at the same time as reducing their natural immunity to viral infection, creating exactly the right conditions for further mutations to occur. Closing the international trade in wild birds must also be central to government policy.

It seems that the spread of H5N1 has followed human trade routes, not migratory bird routes. The Lancet, for example, reports that 'the geographic spread of the disease does not correlate with migratory routes and seasons. The pattern of outbreaks follows major road and rail routes, not flyways'. More research is clearly needed to help us better understand what role the trade in industrially produced poultry has played in the spread of the virus. In the meantime, however, I

would advocate that the government adopt a precautionary approach based on relocalising the poultry sector, stopping the great poultry swap - for example the UK exports almost 10 million kg of poultry and eggs to Ireland each year and imports some 6.5 million kg - and introducing transitional measures to make sure that farmers and those in the developing world do not suffer as a result.

I would appreciate your comments on these matters.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caroline Lucas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Caroline Lucas - Green Party MEP for South East England.