

Brussels, 21.03.2007  
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Dear Dr. Lucas,

Thank you for your letters of 19 and 23 February 2007 concerning the recent outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in a turkey farm in Suffolk.

I have been very concerned by this outbreak and have asked my services to follow the situation very closely.

In relation to the testing of poultry and wild birds in Suffolk, the UK authorities submitted data to the Commission at the meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health on 5 March 2007. In the period following the outbreak, from 6 to 19 February, tests for the detection of the virus were carried out on samples from poultry (domestic geese and ducks) kept in the protection and surveillance zones around the outbreak, from faeces (seagulls), and from wild birds found dead in the vicinity of the infected holding. All tests (on a total of 578 samples) were negative. All 148 poultry flocks in the protection and surveillance zones were inspected for clinical signs of disease, with negative results.

No further cases or outbreaks of disease have occurred in the UK and all information available suggests that the outbreak has been successfully eradicated, without any consequence to human health.

As regards a possible breach of Directive 2005/94/EC by the UK authorities, I would like to make the following comments:

Article 23 of the Directive provides for a possible derogation from the general prohibition on the movement and transport of poultry originating from a holding located in a protection zone.

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European Parliament  
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The possibility for this derogation is important in particular because the production cycle of slaughter poultry is very short, and welfare problems can be avoided when birds can be sent to normal slaughter. In addition, this measure helps to lower the density of poultry in a risky area.

Slaughter poultry may be transported directly to a designated slaughterhouse for immediate slaughter for human consumption under certain conditions, such as clinical inspection of the birds within 24 hours, sealed transport, and specific health marking of the meat obtained from such poultry. This slaughterhouse must not necessarily be located in the protection zone (in many cases no slaughterhouse exists within a 3 km radius of an infected premises), but can be designated in other parts of the affected Member State.

According to the information received by the UK authorities, it was decided on 4 February to make use of this derogation for movements of healthy slaughter birds from holdings located in the protection zone other than the infected premises at Holton, to designated slaughterhouses for immediate slaughter. Such a decision is based on the assessment of the situation, the structure and density of poultry production in the area, the exclusion of possible contacts to the infected holding and the route of transport to the designated slaughterhouse. Provided the precautions prescribed in the Directive are followed, such movements are deemed to pose a low risk for the spread of infection compared, for example, to live poultry movements to other poultry holdings.

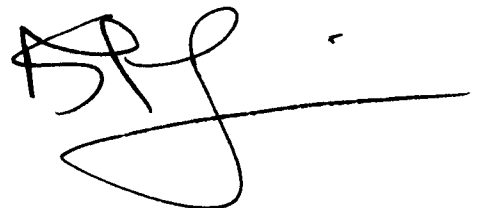
At this stage this derogation was not granted to allow movements of slaughter poultry to the slaughterhouse adjacent to the infected turkey premises in Holton. Transport to these premises was allowed under Article 11 of the Directive in order for the turkeys from the infected holding to be killed in a more humane fashion. Killing took place during 3, 4 and 5 February by using one of the killing lines of the abattoir.

It is important to distinguish this case from cases where an outbreak occurs or is suspected in a slaughterhouse where animals are slaughtered for human consumption, and where additional measures, including an epidemiological inquiry referring to the holding of origin of the slaughter poultry, are to be imposed in accordance with Article 38 of the Directive.

All the investigations on movements of live poultry and hatching eggs have not brought any evidence of possible virus spread. Movement of poultry meat from Hungary to the UK has been identified, but there is no evidence that any infected meat has entered the processing plant in Suffolk. Indeed, in accordance to the UK report made public on 16 February this is only a "working hypothesis" that so far has not been confirmed.

Therefore, from all the information available, it appears that the UK authorities did act in conformity with Directive 2005/94/EC when handling the outbreak on the turkey farm in Suffolk.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. J. G.', with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the bottom of the signature.