

Battling on for Avian Flu preventive vaccination

The hottest July day on record (July 19th) saw EFRC/The Organic Research Centre, along with an extensive alliance of like-minded poultry organisations (see list) busy at the heart of the political establishment – Dining Room B of the House of Commons. There to drive home to the assembled MPs, Lords, Defra officials and other interested parties the core message that the time has now come to deploy preventive vaccination in the UK as a key tool in the fight against the looming endemic status in wild birds of the H5N1 avian influenza (AI) virus.

The reception also saw the launch of the EFRC report - **“Vaccination Nation”** - a study of the arguments surrounding the use of preventive vaccination for the control of H5N1 avian flu in poultry.

Says EFRC director Lawrence Woodward – “ We must be prepared for the H5N1 strain of avian flu to become endemic in the UK and deploy every civilised element in the animal health arsenal to control and manage it. We must show that we have all learned the lesson that planned and timely preventive vaccination is the scientifically proven, politically and socially acceptable route for controlling such serious diseases. “

At the launch of Vaccination Nation the call was for Defra to commit itself publicly and clearly to the drafting of an AI preventive vaccination plan/campaign ready for EU approval, well in time for Autumn 2006. The Defra announcement of July 11th that it is seeking tenders on an option to supply 10 million doses of AI vaccine is a welcome step in the right direction. But it is not enough and the declared Defra policy is still not to use preventive vaccination as a control measure.

Without such vaccination, the only current solution in attempting to separate poultry from wild birds is biosecurity and shutting up (housing). “Shutting up signals the effective end of environmentally-friendly and sustainable poultry systems in the UK. It would be a catastrophe,” says Lawrence Woodward.

Consumer commitment to such outdoor production systems is growing fast. The latest data from the British Egg Industry Council shows over 30% of all UK egg retail sales are free range (3% are organic). The Soil Association reckons that nearly 9 million organic table birds were consumed in the UK in 2005. Add to those commercial birds the breed society enthusiasts, the rare breeds, the waterfowl, show birds and there is a huge body of poultry that requires a civilised strategy of protection from H5N1 AI.

But, set against the enthusiasm of most outdoor poultry producers and keepers are grave reservations from the “industrial” poultry sector.

They consider any move to an AI vaccination policy should not be undertaken lightly. It is not like vaccinating for other poultry diseases - do it and forget about it, they say, because AI would require on-going serological monitoring both pre and post vaccination

to eliminate the possible masking of field challenge. Crucially the biggest worry is over the use of vaccination possibly compromising the UK's export status.

The UK egg industry relies on exports to third countries for the disposal of most of the end of lay hens. Without that they say there would be a real disposal problem - it could be done in existing hen plants on a 'kill and render basis', but the cost to the producer would be considerable. In the UK there are also "Grandparent" layer breeder operations which export day old parent stock around the world.

In the poultry meat industry there are also significant exports with a reliance on them to soak up the wings and legs that are not in demand on the domestic market. UK demand is very heavily skewed to breast meat. There are also World class primary broiler breeding companies in the UK who rely totally on the ability to export.

When limited vaccination was approved by the European Commission in Spring 2006 in response to the AI in wild birds in France and Germany some countries - both within and without the EU - used this as a reason (excuse) to ban imports. UK industrial poultry will need some real reassurance that they are not to become trade pariahs if AI vaccination is allowed.

The next move in this campaign is to bolster the "alliance" with animal welfare and veterinary bodies. Bi-lateral meetings are also being planned with Defra to add some detailed flesh on our outline, preventive vaccination proposals. It seems that unless concerned parties - such as us - do draft this detail, Defra is unwilling or unable to embark on the process.

Supporters of the need for a UK preventive vaccination policy for H5N1 AI

Elm Farm Research Centre	Poultry Club of Great Britain
Organic Food Federation	British Waterfowl Association
Organic Farmers and Growers	The Henkeepers Association
Farm Animal Initiative	Poultry breed Societies
Sheepdrove Organic Farm	