

Call for coherent UK Government strategy on Avian Flu Feb 28th 2006

Organisations representing organic and outdoor poultry producers are alarmed and dismayed at suggestions made by the government's chief scientist, Professor David King, that he is prepared to sacrifice the free-range and organic poultry sector - "if that is what it takes to help defeat Avian Flu." Speaking this week at the NFU conference he said that, in his view, once established Avian Flu will be endemic for five years or more in the UK and rather than use vaccination he would prohibit outdoor production for that period.

"This would mean the end of genuine organic and free-range production in the UK," says Lawrence Woodward, director of the Elm Farm Research Centre near Newbury. "It would be a senseless destruction of a thriving sector which delivers a product the consumer wants simply because of Prof. King's blinkered view of vaccination."

A clear call has come from an alliance (see below) of organisations which represents over 80 per cent of the UK's organic poultry producers for the government to prepare now to vaccinate all organic and outdoor poultry in the UK against avian flu. "Vaccination has been shown to work and other countries are willing to use it, why not here?"

As the threat of Avian Flu hitting these shores grows, the UK Government is showing increasing signs of being in disarray over the disease. The Minister responsible for animal health issues – Margaret Beckett at Defra – says that vaccination is being considered as an addition to the armoury of Avian Flu control, whilst the Government's chief scientific adviser is now taking a different line.

"It's beginning to have overtones of the FMD outbreak", says Lawrence Woodward, whose organisation was at the forefront of the fight to use vaccination at that time. "Dr. King told us then that vaccination wasn't an option and look what happened."

All poultry whether organic or conventional is routinely vaccinated against a range of diseases. Vaccination as a protection against avian flu is no different to this on-going process. "To coin a phrase, without vaccination all outdoor poultry are sitting ducks for cross infection next autumn when migrating wildfowl return to these shores from their summer haunts where H5N1 infection is known to lurk. We need to act now."

Notes – This joint call for preventative vaccination against H5N1 avian flu is supported by the Organic Food Federation, Organic Farmers and Growers, Elm Farm Research Centre, The Biodynamic Agricultural Association and The Henkeepers' Association.

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Rt Hon Margaret Beckett
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DEFRA
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February 24 2006

Dear Mrs Beckett

Urgent need for UK to acquire avian flu vaccine for outdoor/organic poultry

Although we believe that the current risk of organic and other outdoor poultry contracting avian flu from wild birds is minimal it will increase as the virus establishes itself in the wild bird population. This is likely to happen over the coming months and therefore it is timely for the UK to take the decision to acquire and stockpile avian flu vaccine for outdoor poultry; and to take all the necessary steps to be prepared to implement a vaccination strategy.

We applaud the fact that Defra has kept its nerve and not driven free range and organic poultry indoors so far, but we are alarmed that its contingency planning now seems limited in scope, without proper vaccination options.

The EU has agreed that both The Netherlands and France may use preventive vaccination in their outdoor flocks of poultry as a precautionary move against H5N1 avian flu. Both countries have stockpiles of the vaccines to carry out such a procedure.

In the UK, your department Defra, the Government department responsible for agriculture and the countryside, has yet to place a bulk order for such vaccine and has thus severely limited its future options in fighting the H5N1 strain.

Whilst debate continues here about the merits of vaccination – be it “ring vaccination” around confirmed outbreaks, or broader, national preventive vaccination in outdoor and organic flocks – Defra continues to stall on vaccine ordering and slips further behind the queue of clients waiting at the door of the vaccine manufacturers.

For the sake of the future of the UK’s organic and free range poultry industry we urge Defra to place its order now for avian flu vaccine. With such a stockpile acquired, another weapon is added to the armoury against this lethal virus and the full options of preventive and ring vaccination can be kept open.

Already Defra has indicated that it is prepared to allow valuable zoo birds and other collections to vaccinate preventatively and has ordered vaccines for them – so the principle of vaccination in the UK is established and is not in question. Outdoor and organic flocks of poultry are valuable too.

There is a great danger that migrating wildfowl returning to these shores from such regions as the Baltic and Black Sea this autumn will carry the H5N1 strain. We have a window of opportunity now to prepare for the worst. Let us use it to get the vaccines in place for when we need them.

Yours sincerely

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