

Bird flu in Suffolk - latest position (Sunday Feb 4th 2007)

The Suffolk outbreak of avian flu is H5N1. It has been identified as the highly pathogenic Asian strain, similar to the virus found in Hungary in January this year.

The details were confirmed by Defra late on Saturday (Feb 3rd). The infection focus is a turkey farm at Holton (Bernard Matthews), 27km SW of Lowestoft. Culling is now under way (containerised gassing and rendering) to kill in total some 160,000 turkeys there after about 2500 died from the disease. (Only one shed affected out of 22 on site.)

There is general agreement from the Government, scientists and the Food Standards Agency that there is no threat to consumers and human health from this outbreak. No birds have left the site in recent weeks.

A 3km protection zone and a 10km surveillance zone are in force. All movements are restricted in this area and all poultry must be housed . In addition under EU rules an additional area of restrictions has been imposed after consultation with ornithologists and epidemiologists taking into account wild bird flyways/risk pathways in the area. This covers the whole of East Suffolk and South Norfolk covering 2,090 sq km is bordered by the A140 to the west and the A47 to the north and almost to Felixstowe in the south. For this extended area poultry movements would be licensed. The good news is that Defra is not imposing a national lock up on all poultry (i.e. not demanding all organic and free range birds be housed), but all bird fairs and gatherings and pigeon racing are being banned.

This are the latest details on movement licensing etc from Defra -

Text alerts have now been sent to all of the poultry keepers that are registered on the British Poultry Register and are located within the PZ, SZ or RZ. More information will be sent to them shortly.

Movement restrictions have been put in place. Certain movements (under licence) may be allowed in the controlled zone, subject to the risk of disease spread (the Protection Zone, Surveillance Zone and the Restricted Zone form the controlled zone).

The type of controls required and conditions attached will depend on the type of movement (e.g. hatching eggs, live poultry etc), the zone in which the movement originates, and the zone of destination. Application must be made to your local Animal Health Divisional Office (AHDO) for specific licences and 'season tickets' (which allow multiple movements). General licences will be available on the Defra website (and from the AHDO) once the decision has been made to make them available.

Defra has already responded to criticisms in the media suggesting that it responded slowly to the outbreak. Fred Landeg - the government's deputy chief vet - rejected such claims, pointing out that a vet was first called out on Tuesday, but turkeys only began to die in significant numbers two days later, suggesting that avian flu may be the cause of the deaths. (This is a surprising pattern of mortality for highly pathogenic avian flu, especially as only 30 per cent of the turkeys in the one house affected died of the disease. Normal mortality rates for HP H5N1 are 90 per cent, with turkeys particularly susceptible to the virus).

Mr Landeg has also said the most likely source of the outbreak is wild birds, despite the fact that no clear evidence exists to support this hypothesis. Obviously there are big questions as to where this infection has come from. At present in the EU the only other member state with H5N1 is

Hungary. Bernard Matthews has poultry operations in Hungary where production costs are much lower than the UK. It is fair to ask if there are any possible intra company connections?

The company says the turkeys on the farm were not imported, but brought in as day olds from one of its other sites. They are (were) 56 days old.

There are, at present, no other reported/suspected cases in Suffolk or elsewhere in the UK. The area around Holton is one of Defra's wild bird surveillance zones, so it has good intelligence on the wild bird health status there

There are a number of concerns raised by the nature and response to this outbreak in Suffolk.

Is this strain of H5N1 evolving and changing its behaviour to become less pathogenic? If so this would aid spread amongst wild birds which would be infected but not killed or not killed as quickly, thereby improving their efficiency as vectors.

Did cycling of the virus on this huge turkey unit produce a mutation of the virus?

Where did the infection come from? Is there a connection to Hungary?

Is Holton the reference case (primary focus) of the disease or is it present elsewhere and not detected/reported?

Why did it take so long for this outbreak to be confirmed by Defra? The use of modern field diagnostics can deliver diagnosis very quickly.

Did Bernard Matthews staff and its veterinary advisers act quickly enough to isolate the affected house and the production unit?

Why are the turkey carcasses, in the words of Defra "being transported in sealed, leak-proof lorries, fully covered with tarpaulin" for destruction at a Staffordshire plant? This means about 40 lorry loads of highly infectious material travelling half way across the UK to be destroyed. Why is there not a more local facility for destruction in what is the most important poultry region of the UK?

And crucially why is there even now, no move by Defra to begin a programme of preventive vaccination amongst poultry across the UK? Mr Landeg says it takes three weeks for vaccination to become effective. The sooner the vaccine is delivered the sooner some protection against the threat of H5N1 in poultry can be achieved.

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