



ELM FARM RESEARCH CENTRE

The Organic Research Centre www.efrc.com

Briefing Note/Position Statement Avian 'Flu November 2005

A sense of proportion in a world gone Avian 'Flu mad

For the moment the UK's avian 'flu "panic pandemic" of late October has subsided. No more quarantine parrot casualties have fuelled the media frenzy on just how many million of us are destined to die from a disease which has yet to mutate to present a human pandemic threat.

And still the numbers game continues with the World Bank assessing a global economic bill from an avian 'flu pandemic of over £450 billion. The bank is to spend some £600 million on measures to combat its spread.

Meanwhile, avian 'flu has yet to be confirmed within the boundaries of the EU after tests failed to show the H5N1 strain in samples from Greece.

Across the world, mostly in S E Asia, it is now reckoned that less than 70 people have caught the disease from infected poultry and subsequently died. A similar number have been infected and survived; no cases of human to human transmission have been diagnosed or documented. The world desperately needs to develop a sense of proportion on avian 'flu.

The points below are based on the best available information. There is no complacency at EFRC on this serious issue, just a real desire to deal with facts not fantasy and hype.

1/ EFRC considers it crucial that discussion at all levels relating to avian 'flu should differentiate between the real problem caused by the spread of the disease within bird populations – especially within poultry – and the theoretical risks of a human pandemic, which might not happen.

2/ EFRC recognises the potential for a human pandemic should the current H5N1 strain increase its transmissibility through genetic mutation or re-assortment facilitating human to human transmission and if swift measures to safeguard human health fail.

3/ In the UK, contingency planning has focused much attention on outdoor, free-range and organic poultry, with the claimed risk that they are most exposed to infection from wild bird populations. All commercial poultry flocks are now being registered and logged by Defra. Hobby flocks and back-garden birds are not, despite the fact that such intimate mingling of people and poultry most closely mimics the S E Asia experience. EFRC considers this focus on commercial outdoor and organic units disproportionate. (See letter below to Farmers Weekly).

4/ EFRC considers that an alliance of like-minded bodies in the organic and free-range poultry sectors should work together to counter the disproportionate focus of attention on outdoor poultry. It is in discussion with the Soil Association and others on this urgent subject.

5/ Local culling at outbreak sites is the only option. EFRC does not believe that ring-fence vaccination around any future avian 'flu outbreak is a viable control method. No commercial H5N1 vaccine exists and it would take up to six months to manufacture and stockpile.

6/ On vaccination it is not possible to construct a similar argument for preventative vaccination as EFRC built at the time of the 2001 UK foot and mouth outbreak. The volumes of commercial poultry are huge and avian 'flu presents a real zoonotic threat to man (FMD does not). Public and political opinion, once any outbreaks are confirmed, would demand draconian action.

7/ EFRC urges the Government to tackle - as a matter of urgency – the logistical and public relations issues of how to destroy and dispose of millions of poultry birds if the disease arrives in the UK. What is the policy construct on disposal of the potentially hugely infective bulks of associated poultry manure?

8/ As part of the Government's contingency planning EFRC urges real effort in combating the "panic pandemic" which has the potential to demolish the UK poultry sector whether or not avian 'flu arrives here in the bird and/or human population. Already countries such as France, Italy and Greece have seen their poultry consumption drop by between 30% and 70%.

9/ EFRC believes it is tactically wrong for organic and free-range producers to be urged to net or cover parts of their poultry's range in an attempt to mimic indoor production. There is no practical medium to long-term solution for shutting up commercial flocks of poultry without building severe welfare problems, let alone the loss of true organic status. It is not known how long the H5N1 virus would persist in wild bird populations, so moves to confine birds would mean they are kept indoors for an indefinite period.

10/ There is no logic to the argument that organic and free-range birds are likely to exhibit greater resistance to H5N1 infection than intensive commercial poultry. Wild birds apparently exhibit no resistance. But there is logic in assuming that the stress of changing housing arrangements to combat the perceived threat of avian 'flu would increase disease susceptibility generally.

Letter to Farmers Weekly – published November 4th

The Editor, Farmers Weekly
October 31 2005

Avian 'Flu

Sir – Quite understandably our Government continues to draw up contingency plans for the day it has to deal with the H5N1 bird flu within these shores.

As part of the planning it has agreed with the National Farmers' Union to build a database of all commercial poultry units, their location and size. But for reasons of logistics and bureaucracy it is not going to require the estimated half a million domestic keepers of poultry in this country to register their birds.

In the "panic pandemic" currently surrounding bird 'flu in the UK, a disproportionate focus of Government planning has fallen on commercial poultry farms in general and on outdoor, free-range and organic poultry farms in particular. But, as you reported last Friday, not since the Second World War has so much poultry been kept on UK domestic premises. Worryingly, it is these hobby and domestic poultry keepers who most closely mimic the scenario in S E Asia where some 67 human deaths have been recorded in people living amongst, and working alongside, poultry.

If outdoor and extensively reared birds are a real route to a pandemic then the same argument must apply to hobby and domestic birds. The pandemic isn't here yet but in the meantime let us stop kidding ourselves that such incomplete databases are going to help and that intensive, indoor poultry production offers any shelter from the bird 'flu threat.

Yours

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