



## **Avian flu: Don't place all the blame on wild birds** Human activities not birds more likely to spread the virus

22 May 2006 - Avian influenza (bird flu) is a complex issue in which wild birds have most often been identified as the culprits. It is indeed likely that they can introduce the disease to unaffected areas from countries in which the disease has already been identified - but the disease is spread through the human activities of poultry production, improper hygiene and uncontrolled commercialisation.

It is unreasonable to place the blame on wild birds as the source of the H5N1 strain of the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus in the absence of rigorous research into their role in the ecology and dynamics of the virus. FAO has been calling for such research since early 2004, but insufficient resources have been allocated to be able to study the question properly.

The simple fact is that more research is needed to understand wild bird migration and the vulnerability of different species in order to perform proper risk assessments, and recommend risk mitigation measures where required.

To this end, FAO and the **World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)** are organising an **international scientific conference on avian influenza and wild birds** from 30-31 May in Rome to try to understand better the role of wild birds in the transmission of avian flu. Also up for discussion will be the risk of wild birds becoming a permanent reservoir of the virus and identification of the main knowledge gaps for research.

In the meantime, notes Juan Lubroth, Head of FAO's Infectious Disease Group, it is very easy to point the finger at migratory birds, but this distracts from the effort it and OIE are making to improving hygiene, good husbandry and production practices and monitoring of the poultry sector which require strong partnerships between the regulatory government sector and private industry and its farmers.

As an international agency which has invested considerable resources in numerous aspects of biodiversity preservation and conservation, FAO would be the last to pinpoint wildlife as the sole source of virus dissemination.

FAO and OIE, along with working partners such as the Wildlife Conservation Society and Wetlands International, have repeatedly stressed that prevention (through better hygiene in the production chain), control and HPAI eradication efforts should be targeted at all poultry production sectors - be it in the commercial or rural household sectors - in order to contain the disease and prevent it from spreading further.

Surveillance for avian influenza viruses and the presence of the HPAI H5N1 virus in wildlife can be given priority only once adequate surveillance of the poultry sector is in place, since poultry are more likely to transmit infection to humans and other susceptible animals. To devote resources to monitoring wild birds rather than take stock of production practices and improving such practices would not be justified.

At the same time, FAO is not particularly in favour of the banning of regularised and sanctioned hunting of wildlife for sport, tradition or livelihood for the simple reason that informal and illegal would most likely continue. It argues that hunters and hunting clubs should join the avian flu surveillance effort by becoming sources of information and even providers of valuable field samples for the study of viruses that these species could carry.