

Session 1.2 Perspectives from the Leading Technical Agencies

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

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Our Main Message: Stop the Disease at its Source

FAO has three main messages to convey on the problem we are addressing in this meeting:

(1) The core of the problem is the circulation of the HPAI H5N1 virus in domestic poultry; priority action for solving the problem is therefore at the level of the animal. This is the only way by which the likelihood of the H5N1 virus acquiring human-to-human transmissibility can be influenced.

(2) The window of opportunity for doing exactly that is still open – the virus has not yet re-assorted or mutated; action is required now; there is no time to lose here.

(3) The strategies, plans and practices for addressing the problem are available and agreed in detail, globally, regionally and for most affected and at risk countries at short, medium and long term perspectives. There is therefore no technical justification for delaying the implementation of the required action at the appropriate level of funding.

No doubt, to stop this dangerous and devastating disease does require extraordinary political commitment, very substantial investments, concerted international cooperation, and severe action at the country level. We expect this meeting to facilitate rapid progress on each of these fronts.

Since its appearance in 1996, the disease has been devastating to several countries in Asia, where over 150 million chickens and ducks have died from the disease or been culled. The impact on the economies of those countries is estimated at much beyond \$10 billion; across South-East Asia, the impact of a single large outbreak was estimated in 2004 to result in the reduction of up to 1.5% of GDP. The impact, however, is greatest on the estimated 200 million small farmers, i.e. the rural poor, whose livelihoods have been heavily affected by the disease.

Let me give you some information on the dynamics of world poultry and bird ecology as a background to the current animal health crisis.

Population growth, urbanization and the rise of incomes increase the demand for animal protein at an exponential rate. Annual growth of the poultry sector now exceeds five percent. Global poultry bird population stands at 18 billion today, up from 14 billion ten years ago.

The developments in Asia have been particularly dynamic. Domestic duck populations in China and Vietnam together comprise 78 percent of the world duck population and have increased three-fold over the past two decades. It is important to note that this has

been a development taking place in less than 0.5 percent of the earth's terrestrial surface. This concentration of over one billion ducks and geese, many of them kept in open systems, has provided an effective breeding ground for the myriad of avian influenza viruses circulating in the wild waterfowl pool.

On this background, it is not surprising that this disease has emerged. It has recently been reported in Mongolia, the Siberian region of Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Romania and Croatia. It is believed to have been carried there by migratory birds which may carry the virus much further still into their wintering areas in Africa and South Asia. From there, the wild bird flyways overlap with those from Europe and elsewhere. Thus, there is real concern over the possible world-wide spread of the virus. The problem, previously considered an Asian problem only, is increasingly recognized as a global one.

While little can be done to control the disease in wild birds, much can be done to stop its spread in domestic poultry which is the current source for human infection and the source of the economic devastation. This is where FAO is placing its emphasis on. It is time to double and redouble the efforts to stop Avian Influenza at its source, i.e. in the animals, before it affects humans and before it further decimates rural communities.

FAO's Role

To combat Avian Influenza, FAO has, from the outset, adopted a three-pronged approach.

First, and foremost, we are working with all affected countries and countries at risk to strengthen their veterinary services and to improve local capacity at the farm and market levels in order to: (1) to improve the surveillance, detection and reporting of the disease both in wildlife and domestic birds, (2) to implement biosecurity measures aimed at preventing the spread of the disease; and (3) to efficiently control the disease, once detected, and to limit its spread. There are known and proven practices for this operation, such as isolating poultry, good farm hygiene, use of effective vaccines, close monitoring, and quick culling when necessary, among others. These practices and inputs do work, and there are success stories in several countries to report. In a longer term, serious consideration will have to be given to the re-structuring of livestock production systems with emphasis on species separation and confinement. As Secretary General Kofi Annan has said a few days ago, it may well be necessary for humanity to review its ways of close co-habitation with animals. FAO has been providing advice on how to apply these practices, offering capacity building, developing guidelines and manuals, helping equip veterinary laboratories, assisting access to vaccines, and assisting countries in the design of their prevention and control strategies. Important for the successful delivery of these essential practices are the integration of public and private initiative and resources and the deployment of all available relevant professional capacity world-wide behind this task. FAO and OIE submit that we have the necessary platform for this deployment to materialize. My colleague Dr. Domenech will expand on this when he will introduce the mechanism agreed in the Global Framework for the Progressive Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases (GF-TADs).

A *second* facet of our work deals with regional networking and information-sharing. We have helped put in place regional networks for exchanging information on the occurrence of the disease and on lessons learned in combating it. The epidemiology of Avian Influenza is complex and requires careful attention. FAO has always stressed the importance of timely reporting of outbreaks and sharing of epidemiological data and of virus samples. This is crucial to analyze the characteristics of the viruses in order to

understand and control the disease and prevent human infection. FAO and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) have repeatedly appealed to governments to improve the exchange of viral strains between veterinary and human health scientific communities.

A *third* dimension of FAO's work is to provide real-time technical information globally and to advocate for an internationally coordinated effort against the disease. Crucially important in this is the science-based preparation of effective risk assessment, risk communication and early warning messages. We have, usually jointly with OIE, WHO and affected countries, organized several international and regional meetings to raise the profile of the Avian Influenza control programme. We provide regular information updates through our website and through various publications, such as the Avian Influenza Disease Emergency News Bulletin. We have also extensively communicated with multilateral and bilateral donors and government officials in a sustained effort to sound the alarm and mobilize action.

At this point, it is important to stress that FAO is not working in isolation. The world is up against a complex problem, with overwhelming human and economic consequences. Working alone, no organization will solve it. Partnerships are needed. In particular, FAO is in very close partnership with OIE. We have developed jointly a Global Strategy for the Progressive Control of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), have canvassed WHO support for that strategy and are working hand-in-glove to implement it. We are also working in collaboration with other UN partners and with bilateral donors, NGOs, research establishments and with the UN coordination mechanism under the leadership of David Nabarro.

Research Needs

It is important to recognize that there are significant researchable issues to be resolved which require adequate attention and support: examples are orally or eye drop applied poultry vaccines that would confer immediate protection; rapid and sensitive diagnostic assays; better understanding of the role of migratory birds in the spread of HPAI; and effective risk assessment procedures using all relevant factors driving virus evolution and spread.

Financial Needs

Let me close by mentioning money. Much more is needed than currently invested. Too much emphasis has been given to the stockpiling of antiviral drugs while the battle against bird flu in animals remains seriously under-funded. This is unacceptable. A global investment programme is needed to stop and reduce the circulation of virus in animals to reduce the risk to humans. Although FAO's financial resources are limited, we have been able to devote \$7.5 million toward this crisis in Asia and the new areas at risk in central Asia and the Caucasus, in South-East Europe, the Middle East and in Africa. However, our current updated estimate calls for investments of \$494 million for the global fight against the disease in animals up to 2008. So far only about \$30 million have been committed; there is therefore a very considerable gap in the support to this crucially important process.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me reiterate that as the world takes prudent measures to prepare for a major human influenza pandemic, more decisive measures must be taken by affected countries, the civil society and private sector organizations and by the international community to stop this disease, in its tracks, at its source, in animals. This is possible; the window of opportunity for this to happen is still open. It can be done. FAO looks forward to continuing to work with all of you to make it happen.

FAO Animal Production and Health Division
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