

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs UPDATE ON AVIAN INFLUENZA OUTBREAK IN NORTHERN IRELAND *Published at 4.30pm on Monday 24 February 2025*

This statement sets out the current steps being taken by my Department in response to the current avian influenza outbreak in Northern Ireland (NI).

Background

Avian influenza (AI), commonly known as bird flu, is a highly contagious viral disease affecting the respiratory, digestive and/or nervous system of many species of birds, and it is essential to emphasise that failure to report it constitutes an offence.

The advice from the Public Health Agency notes – AI is primarily a disease of birds and the risk to the general public's health is very low. The advice from the Food Standards Agency notes – AI poses a very low food safety risk for UK consumers, and that properly cooked poultry and poultry products, including eggs, are safe to eat.

Northern Ireland relies heavily on the agri-food industry as a source of employment. Poultry and egg production contributes significantly to the economy, and is valued at over £600 million, it is vital that we protect this industry.

Actions Taken

I want to outline the measures being taken by my Department in response to current AI incursions here in NI.

In terms of AI preparedness in NI, my Department has well established robust disease control contingency plans in place to manage the risk of disease incursions and protect this industry. The AI response plan outlines clear procedures for responding to suspected cases, including rapid diagnostic testing, protocols to restrict movements and the establishment of disease control zones to mitigate for onward spread of the disease.

I introduced an Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ) across NI on Saturday 18 January 2025. The decision to introduce the AIPZ came following a disease risk assessment carried out by DAERA veterinary officials, taking several disease risk factors into consideration, including results from wild bird investigations.

The measures in the AIPZ include stringent, mandatory biosecurity measures to help prevent the spread of the disease from wild birds or another source to poultry; a requirement that poultry or other captive birds are provided with food and water to which wild birds have no access, and mandatory rules on cleansing and disinfection.

On 3 February 2025, a captive bird premises in Magherafelt reported dead captive and wild birds via the DAERA Dead Wild Bird Online Reporting Tool. Carcasses were collected for further testing and the Agri-food and Bioscience Institute (AFBI) reported preliminary confirmation that samples from all five birds had tested positive for highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1.

Following the preliminary result from AFBI, my Department introduced a Captive Bird Temporary Control Zone (CBTCZ) in the 3km zone around the captive bird premises. The CBTCZ came into effect from Friday 7 February 2025. In addition, the remaining 69 captive birds on site were culled for disease control purposes to mitigate against onward spread of disease.

Following official laboratory confirmation of the results at the UK National Reference Laboratory, Weybridge, the Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) formally confirmed the presence of HPAI H5N1 at the captive bird premises in Magherafelt, County Londonderry. The CBTCZ was replaced with a 3km Captive Bird Monitoring Controlled Zone (CBMCZ) around the affected premises as of Thursday 13 February 2025.

In response to this finding in Magherafelt and in an effort to mitigate against any incursion of HPAI into our domestic poultry sector, I took the decision on 12 February 2025 to introduce a mandatory housing order across all of NI for all kept birds and poultry effective from 00:01 on Monday 17 February 2025. This was announced on Wednesday 12 February to permit time for industry to prepare. In addition, a ban on poultry gatherings has been implemented in conjunction with this housing order.

The housing order legally requires all bird keepers, including owners of pet birds, commercial flocks, backyard and hobby flocks to keep their birds indoors or otherwise separate from wild birds. This move is part of the AIPZ which I introduced on 18 January 2025.

In addition, I have been in discussions with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, DAFM Minister Martin Heydon, T.D and I welcome the introduction of similar measures, resulting in a housing order applying in both jurisdictions from Monday 17 February.

On Friday 14 February 2025 a suspect AI report investigation was instigated at a premises near Dungannon, County Tyrone after a number of mortalities in a commercial poultry laying flock. Following the preliminary results from AFBI which indicated the presence of HPAI H5N1 and clinical signs observed in the affected poultry house the CVO took the decision to establish temporary disease control zones around the affected premises. This was implemented at 19:00 on 15 February 2025.

The premises consisted of 64,000 birds across four houses. Humane culling of the affected birds has been completed. Results have been received from the UK National Reference Laboratory, Weybridge Wednesday 19 February verifying the presence of HPAI H5N1 allowing the CVO to officially confirm disease at the affected premises on Thursday 20 February 2025. The temporary disease control zones have now been replaced with a 3km Protection Zone (PZ) and 10km Surveillance Zone (SZ), effective Thursday 20 February 2025.

Furthermore, following reports of a suspect incursion on 22 February 2025, preliminary results from AFBI have indicated the presence of HPAI at a further commercial poultry premises near Pomeroy, County Tyrone. The CVO took the decision to implement temporary disease control zones around the site from 23 February 2025. There are approximately 16,000 birds on the premises which will be humanely culled. Samples will be sent to the UK National Reference Laboratory, Weybridge for confirmation of disease.

Communications

My Department continues to deploy wide ranging communications reminding all flock keepers of the necessity of adhering to high levels of biosecurity. Comprehensive biosecurity guidance is available on the DAERA website:

[Clinical Signs, Biosecurity Checklist and Guidance | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

This guidance emphasises the importance of maintaining high biosecurity standards to help reduce the risk of transmission of AI to poultry or other captive birds.

Continued vigilance is paramount, and it is essential veterinary practitioners and flock keepers remain alert to any unusual symptoms reporting these immediately to a veterinarian or directly to DAERA. Further detail including photos of clinical signs are also available on the DAERA website.

While we have implemented significant protective measures, there is no room for complacency. We must continue to convey clear messages—both within the bird and poultry community and beyond—

about the importance of responsible sourcing to protect our domestic poultry from disease incursions, maintaining high biosecurity standards, and promptly reporting any unusual symptoms.

Next Steps

My officials will continue to engage with stakeholders from across the agri-food sector to update them on this evolving situation and will continue to reinforce the importance of biosecurity measures and vigilance.

The CVO and his team will maintain the ongoing close contact with their counterparts, and we have developed a clear and comprehensive communications plan, which will be adapted as necessary in the coming days. I am also committed to keeping colleagues informed and will provide updates as necessary.

I would request, at this time, that members assist us in disseminating key messages regarding the requirement to register all birds, maintaining vigilance, and the need for flock keepers to immediately report any unusual symptoms.

These steps will further help to ensure the protection of our poultry industry, and the agricultural sector which is vital to our economy.