

**Annex of the minutes of the plenary meeting
of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Animal Welfare
on 29th – 30th January in Barcelona**

Statement from the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (AHAW) on Avian Influenza (AI)

From: AHAW Panel, Statement on avian influenza from plenary meeting on 29th-30th January 2004 in Barcelona

To: EFSA Directorate (Mr Geoffrey Podger, Mr Herman Koëter)

Date: 30th January

1. Avian Influenza (AI) infections are of growing importance in the veterinary and public health fields. Since 1997 there have been a significant number of AI outbreaks leading to death or culling of over 60.000.000 birds worldwide. Even more worrying are the repeated episodes of human infections resulting from AI. The increase in the number of epidemics and the scientific data available with respect to the molecular basis of pathogenicity have generated concerns particularly for legislative purposes and for international trade. This has led to a proposal from the Scientific Committee¹ on Animal Health and Animal Welfare of DG SANCO for a revised definition of “avian influenza” to include all infections caused by H5 and H7 viruses (regardless of their virulence) in poultry as notifiable diseases. The Panel supports this revised definition and recommends its adoption.

2. The potential zoonotic significance of avian influenza has been emphasised by recent epidemics, in particular by human illness and fatalities following direct infection with avian influenza viruses as well as by the subsequent risk of generating reassortant avian/human viruses which could lead to the next human influenza pandemic.

¹ Definition of Avian Influenza. The use of vaccination against Avian Influenza. SCAHAW 27/06/2000 http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/sc/scah/out45_en.pdf) and Diagnosis techniques and vaccination for FMD, CSF, AI and some important OIE list A diseases. SCAHAW 24/04/2003 http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/sc/scah/out93_en.pdf).

3. To reduce the risk of the generation of a reassortant virus with pandemic potential for humans, the circulation of the H5N1 virus should be limited, and the contacts between infected poultry and mammalian hosts of influenza viruses (particularly with humans and pigs) should be minimised. There are problems in achieving this due to the vastness and diversity of the areas and the animal and human population affected the poor hygienic conditions, and the difficulty in diagnosing outbreaks.

4. The Panel took note of the recent decision of the European Commission to ban import of live captive and pet birds from various Asian countries which have reported confirmed outbreaks of H5N1. Because of the extensive trans-border bird migration and live bird trade throughout the region, the Panel recognizes that the import of birds to the EU from neighbouring countries in the region may also pose a risk.

5. The Panel has discussed the present situation regarding AI and agreed that this could represent a significant risk for the EU poultry industry and a potential danger for the possible generation of a new pandemic virus for the human population.

6. Because of the animal health implications the AHAW Panel wishes to establish a Working Group of experts² with the mandate to be prepared to address urgent issues in case of a new virus outbreak and make proposals that contribute to the containment and controlling of these outbreaks. The Working Group should carry out risk assessments, as appropriate, related to the potential introduction of AI virus and possible secondary spread of the infection in the EU.

7. The Panel further recommends the establishment of an international multidisciplinary Operational Task Force for AI in the South East of Asia. This Task Force should consider both animal health and direct and indirect human health implications of AI outbreaks and focus on diagnosis and characterisation of strains, infection pathways and setting up of preventive measures, including vaccination and biosecurity. The Task Force should include expertise in medical and veterinary virology and epidemiology with experience in the management of AI outbreaks including the killing of animals with proper consideration of their welfare. The Task Force should comprise experts from international organisations (FAO, WHO, OIE), the involved governments, European Community Institutions and the private sector.

² This proposal fits into the priorities identified by the Panel (self-mandate-task 1) as agreed at the last Plenary meeting held on 9 December 2003.