Action for Animal Health. August 2023.

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (H5N1) Position Statement

Action for Animal Health calls on multilateral organisations, governments and donors to build strong animal health systems that can prevent and detect cases of avian influenza – as well as other zoonotic and animal diseases - as quickly as possible.

Context

We are facing the largest outbreak of avian influenza (subtype H5N1) in history. In Europe, Asia, the Americas and West Africa, well over 140 million birds have died or have been culled to try to control the disease (WOAH 2023; University of Cambridge 2023, The Guardian 2022). It is impacting the welfare of animals, conservation of bird species, trade, livelihoods, and the mental health of farmers (WOAH 2023, WHO 2023).

Cases are escalating, which suggests the usual approach to dealing with H5N1 outbreaks is not working. Patterns of bird migration are changing because of shifting weather patterns and climate change; wild birds and livestock are becoming closer; and demand for chicken meat and eggs is growing. Governments, multilaterals and donors need to re-think their approach to animal disease control.

H5N1 does not transmit from human to human at this moment. However, the changing pattern of the virus means that its trajectory is difficult to predict, and no one can be certain of the outcomes at this stage. Highly pathogenic influenza infections are shifting from being a seasonal disease to being endemic (BMJ 2023).

COVID-19 has heightened public awareness of the risks that zoonotic diseases could pose to people. Whilst H5N1 is not a pandemic threat in the current moment, we do not want to wait and see. The WHO, WOAH and FAO have urged countries to ensure influenza pandemic preparedness in response to the current outbreak (WHO 2023).

Governments, donors and multilateral organisations have an opportunity to shift to prevention of spillover of zoonotic diseases through increased long-term investment in building fit-for-purpose animal health systems that can detect and respond to outbreaks of any zoonotic or animal disease in its earliest stage.

Control outbreaks short term; build stronger systems long term

We want to see short term and long term strategies from governments (namely national veterinary authorities), donors, and multilateral organisations, for dealing with the global outbreak of H5N1. These involve responding in the short term to the current outbreak in a way that protects animal welfare, public health and livelihoods; and building stronger animal health systems holistically in the long term for early detection and rapid response to outbreaks of animal and zoonotic diseases.

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We need to see comprehensive H5N1 control strategies that include biosecurity on all types of farms, disease surveillance in domestic and wild animals, and vaccination. Better cooperation between governments is essential for faster authorisation of vaccines and faster development of DIVA vaccines (to differentiate vaccinated from infected birds)

Ultimately, a strong animal health system is needed to develop and implement control strategies like vaccination. Therefore we need longer-term commitment from governments, the private sector, donor countries, and multilateral organisations to invest in animal health systems that can deal with the multiple threats to animal health and people's health. Veterinary services should be treated as a public good - not just for trade and consumption.

Business-as-usual could end in a pandemic

The longer it circulates in domestic birds, the more likely the virus will mutate - or reassort with another flu strain - leading to potential human-to-human transmission. It is imperative to stem circulation of the virus in domestic birds in ways that promote animal welfare in the short term, and build strong animal health systems in the long term that can better prevent and respond to H5N1 outbreaks as well as other zoonotic and animal diseases.

It is unsustainable to continue firefighting disease outbreaks when they occur, as funds are often diverted from one problem to fight another. Governments must invest in the long-term financing of animal health systems to strengthen the system as a whole, to prevent animal and zoonotic diseases that they have prioritised. As per an analysis by the World Bank, the cost of prevention is modest compared to crisis response. Prevention costs could be just 1% of the cost of response to COVID-19 in 2020 alone. This 1% includes $2.1 billion per year to bring public veterinary services up to international standards, and US$5 billion to improve farm biosecurity (World Bank 2023)

Some resource-constrained countries with weaker surveillance may not know their current avian influenza situation. Inadequate animal disease surveillance means diseases could be detected only once they have spilled-over to people, as in the case of Rift Valley Fever in Western Uganda, or Marburg Virus in Tanzania, in early 2023 (Kabami et al. 2023; WHO 2023) . This has also happened with avian influenza in previous years, such as in Cambodia where human cases were detected before dead birds were reported (Ly 2016). This is a sign of weaknesses in the animal health system.

To incentivise reporting farmers need to receive adequate compensation at market value for healthy and sick birds that are culled. This will also improve the data available on the prevalence of H5N1. However, a 'stamping-out' approach through culling is financially unsustainable in the long term, especially for countries with limited financial resources, and has serious implications for animal welfare if culling is not conducted humanely. It could also have implications for food security and nutrition.

Without long-term sustainable investment in animal health systems, we will continue to take the same resource-intensive fire-fighting approach to animal health emergencies and public health emergencies. It is clear that animal health professionals take the threat of avian influenza seriously, but veterinary services need buy-in and support from other areas of

government to secure the resources needed for long term strengthening of animal health systems.

Recommendations for multilateral organisations, donors and governments

- Donors, donor countries and multilaterals should prioritise long-term consistent funding for animal health systems strengthening in lower and middle income countries, so that systems are equipped to prevent, prepare and respond to disease outbreaks and can effectively deliver control strategies such as surveillance and vaccination programmes
- Invest in community engagement and access to services, upskilling the animal health workforce, guaranteeing access to quality veterinary medicines and vaccines, improving animal disease surveillance, and building platforms for effective One Health implementation
- Create avian influenza control strategies that prioritise active and passive surveillance (including community based surveillance), biosecurity measures for all sizes of farms, promotion of animal welfare, vaccination in high risk areas in tandem with surveillance of vaccinated flocks, and longer-term systems strengthening, so that culling can be minimised wherever possible
- Where culling must take place, ensure humane slaughter standards are maintained, provide market-value compensation for healthy and sick birds that are culled
- Provide incentives to farmers to vaccinate their birds, and to report cases of avian influenza. Provide accessible mechanisms for farmers to report cases of avian influenza that do not rely on an internet connection. Raise awareness amongst farmers of what signs and symptoms should be reported
- Connect, communicate and share data between ministries dealing with human health, animal health, wildlife and environmental issues
- Encourage cooperation between countries to trade vaccinated animals through an international trade agreement
- Report all cases through the World Animal Health Information System
- Reconsider guidance on domestic bird densities on farms to reduce the risk of spread of avian influenza, as well as to improve bird welfare
- Broaden the mandate and funding mechanisms of veterinary services to being a public good, not just for trade and consumption
- Communicate risks and preventative actions to animal health workers, human health workers, and communities.

This position statement reflects the position of the coalition as a whole, and does not necessarily reflect the position of individual coalition members