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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

POSITION STATEMENT ON AVIAN INFLUENZA

issued by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee
on behalf of English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage
[and the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside]

1. Background

- 1.1 Avian influenza is widespread in populations of wild birds, but typically has low lethality (so-called Low Pathogenic Avian Influenza - LPAI). There is current concern as to the occurrence of a highly virulent form of this virus (Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza - HPAI - of the form H5N1) in south-east Asia since 2003 and its recent spread to Kazakhstan and southern Russia. The means of this spread are not known. This concern arises, not only from the impacts of this infection on stocks of domestic poultry, but especially from the risk of human infection with HPAI as well as the theoretical potential that HPAI may mutate to a form that could spread between humans resulting in a global influenza pandemic.
- 1.2 There has been concern that westerly migrating wild birds may further spread HPAI from outbreaks in Russia to Europe. Long-term investment in programmes that monitor the numbers and distribution of the UK's waterbird populations, as well as information on bird movements gained from the National Ringing Scheme (organised by the British Trust for Ornithology), aid in evaluating this risk.

2. Current levels of risk

- 2.1 It is known that only a small number of the species of migratory waterbirds arriving in the UK this autumn will potentially come from the current outbreak area to the east of the Urals¹.
- 2.2 The probability of infected birds arriving in the UK will depend on the proportion of wild birds in affected areas that have come into contact with the infection, the transmission rate of the virus, the mortality rate and incubation period for HPAI, and the likelihood that an infected individual could undertake a long-distance migration from an outbreak area. These factors are currently difficult to quantify.
- 2.3 Risk depends also on the overall proportion of the concerned populations from the infected areas that migrate to the UK. For most species, this proportion is believed to be low. It will also vary seasonally, as in any species, influenza viruses are more prevalent in some seasons than others.

2.4 Risk factors will change should the current outbreak spread westwards, since more migratory species would then be potentially available as vectors.

2.5 **Overall our advice to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the devolved administrations is that although a risk of introduction of HPAI by migrating birds does exist, the level of this risk is currently considered to be low as few migrating birds reaching the UK are likely to originate from currently infected areas. However, we currently have insufficient information on viral behaviour and the ability of infected birds to migrate to fully assess the risk at this stage.**

3. Next steps

3.1 The UK statutory agencies are committed to assisting UK government, the devolved administrations, and others to monitor the current situation. To this end we will:

- i. Contribute our expertise and participate in a Working Group established by DEFRA and the devolved administrations to assess the risk that migrating birds might transport HPAI to Europe. The first meeting of the group will be held on Wednesday 31 August.
- ii. Contribute to contingency planning being currently undertaken by DEFRA and the devolved administrations in the event of an outbreak of HPAI in the UK.
- iii. Support DEFRA and the devolved administrations in liaising with other EU Member States and the international community on avian influenza issues.
- iv. Assessment of UK risk depends on understanding the spread of the disease internationally, as well as those measures put in place to co-ordinate surveillance of influenza in both wild and domestic birds. We will accordingly work with Wetlands International, especially through its *ad hoc* coordination unit, and other international organisations to develop international understanding so as to provide this wider context to the UK government and devolved administrations, the European Union and other relevant bodies.
- v. Continue to support the Wetland Bird Survey and National Ringing Scheme as fundamental sources of information that aid the assessment of current risk.
- vi. We will work with others to develop and disseminate clear health and safety guidance for individuals whose activities may bring them into contact with potentially infected birds, such as bird ringers and hunters.
- vii. We will encourage relevant research at national and international scales, specifically in the following areas:
 - a. Clarification of the nature of migratory routes and timings for key migratory species; and further development of existing ecological monitoring of these populations.

- b. Clarification of the virus behaviour in different waterbird populations, especially viral incubation periods, the infectious period in birds, symptoms in wild birds, as well as survival rates.
- c. We will keep our position under review and provide updated statements as the situation requires.

4. Further information

Further information on the current situation can be found on the following web-sites:

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs:

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/disease/avianinfluenza.htm

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/int-trde/misc/cins/2005/0570.htm

Office International des Epizooties: www.oie.int

World Health Organisation:

www.who.int/csr/don/2005_08_18/en/index.html

Wetlands International: www.wetlands.org/birdflu

European Commission:

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/1068&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

BirdLife International:

www.birdlife.org/action/science/species/avian_flu/index.html

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm

US Geological Service's National Wildlife Health Center:

www.nwhc.usgs.gov/research/avian_influenza/avian_influenza.html

5. Statutory conservation agency avian influenza contact points

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ⁱ Those Asian regions of Russia with current outbreak of HPAI are: Altai, Tumen, Omsk, Kurgan, Chelyabinsk and Novosibirsk.