

Intergroup
SUSTAINABLE HUNTING, BIODIVERSITY & COUNTRYSIDE ACTIVITIES
Intergroupe
CHASSE DURABLE, BIODIVERSITÉ & ACTIVITÉS RURALES
Intergruppe
NACHHALTIGE JAGD, BIODIVERSITÄT & LÄNDLICHE AKTIVITÄTEN
Intergruppo
CACCIA SOSTENIBILE, BIODIVERSITÀ & ATTIVITÀ RURALI
Intergrupo
CAZA SOSTENIBLE, BIODIVERSIDAD & ACTIVIDADES RURALES

Meeting of 15.03.2006
Avian Influenza and Conservation of Wild Birds

MEPs

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DIAZ de MERA, Agustín (EPP-ED, Es)
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de GRANDES, Louis (EPP-ED, Es)
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HELMER, Roger (NA, UK)

KLAB, Christa (EPP-ED, De)
LEHTINEN, Lasse (PES, Fin)
MATHIEU, Véronique (EPP-ED, Fr)
MUSCAT, Joseph (PES, Mt)
NAVARRO, Robert (PES, Fr)
PARISH, Neil (EPP-ED, UK)
PIEPER, Markus (EPP-ED, De)
SCHIERHUBER, Agnes (EPP-ED, At)
SEEBER, Richard (EPP-ED, At)
STURDY, Robert (EPP-ED, UK)

Represented

BUSUTTIL, Simon (EPP-ED, Mt)
FLORENZ, Karl-Heinz (EPP-ED, De)

SOMMER, Renate (EPP-ED, De)

Apologised

FRIEDRICH, Ingo (EPP-ED, De)
GALA, Milan (EPP-ED, Sk)

LULLING, Astrid (EPP-ED, Lux)
WATSON, Graham (ALDE, UK)

Commission

van GOETHEM, Bernard (Director DG SANCO)
KYPRIANOU, Markos (Commissioner for Public
Health and Consumer Protection)

O'BRIAIN, Michael (Policy Officer DG ENV)

Experts/Observers

BAUER, Françoise (CoE)
BANA, Giovanni (FACE It)
CARETTA, Maria Christina (CONFAVI)
COKAYNE, Mark (BASC)
GIRARD, Ronan (ELO)
HOGGARTH, Tim (FACE UK)
LASEN DIAZ, Carolina (CoE)

LEBERSORGER, Peter (FACE At)
ORUSA, Ricardo (CORMAS)
de TURCKHEIM, Gilbert (FACE)
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Assistants

CORDINA, Elaine (S. BUSUTTIL)
DAGEN, Julia (K.-H. FLORENZ)
GRÜNDEL, Sarah (R. SOMMER)
MORSELLI, Lorenzo (R. NAVARRO)
NOTDURFTER Christian (M. EBNER)
OULÈS, Florence (V. MATHIEU)
UNTERKOFLENER, Myriam (M. EBNER)

Secretariat

ESPÁRRAGO, Manuel (FACE)
LECOCQ, Yves (FACE)
von STEYNITZ, Max (FACE)

1. Opening Remarks and Introduction

M. EBNER, President-Coordinator of the Intergroup, opens the meeting and welcomes all MEPs present or represented, as well as the invited speakers, experts and guests. Above all, he welcomes the *Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection*, M. KYPRIANOU, who willingly accepted the invitation to speak about the current situation of Avian Influenza (AI) at this meeting of this Intergroup.

2. Measures undertaken by the Commission on Avian Influenza and wild birds (Commissioner KYPRIANOU)

After the chair of this meeting is handed over to the Co-President of the Intergroup, MEP R. STURDY, the speakers and high representatives of the Commission present, especially Commissioner M.KYPRIANOU, are welcomed. To start, R. STURDY expresses his concerns that at present nobody is able to give evidence about the influence that AI will have, not just on hunting, but particularly on the entire population of wild birds in the EU. He would also like to know the consequences that Avian Influenza will have on huntable birds and threatened species. He further mentions that according to official reports, many EU Member States and neighbouring states are not prepared for AI.

Afterwards, he gives the floor to M. KYPRIANOU, who makes a presentation about public and animal health, environment and the conservation of wild birds. He provides a general overview about the current situation in the EU. On the basis of the impending bird migration and the resulting arrival of the virus in European territories, the EU has undertaken the necessary strengthening of protection measures, namely observation and reporting systems for poultry and wild birds. The adopted Regulations, which are based on the level of risk, apply to all Member States; however, they differentiate in the form in which they are applied in the regions, dependent on the local prevailing circumstances. In the EU, the advantage exists that the virus had already been discovered and as such, commercial poultry operations were forewarned, which means that the protection measures make an impact. Regarding vaccinations, he confirms the advantages and disadvantages of this measure; in previous legislation it was approved as emergency measures. The new legislation also permits these to be introduced as preventative measures, however only when accompanied by further containment measures, as their use as a solitary measure is nowhere near as effective as believed. Currently, France and the Netherlands are preparing to undertake these vaccinations. Both countries could be regarded as pilot projects for the effectiveness of the vaccination, but both authorisations need to be accompanied by strict controls, as, despite vaccination, the animals can still transmit the virus.

Afterwards, he addresses the difficulties in Africa, where infrastructure is poor and should the virus become endemic, the threat exists that it would become a constant threat or source of infection for migratory birds that migrate to or over the EU.

Currently, relatively little is known about the AI virus, although the Commission tries, through different financed measures, to learn as much as possible about it. One cannot simply eradicate the virus by killing all wild birds, rather more important is the undertaking and supporting of protection, monitoring and preventative measures, especially to avoid the transmission to domestic poultry. For this programme, which will also be carried out in Third Countries, the Commission makes 100 million euros available and the Member States a further 114 million euros.

With regard to hunting, he informs participants that the *Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health* has confirmed that a ban on bird hunting is deemed totally unnecessary. The Commissioner points out that for understandable reasons (in particular, not disturbance of the natural balance), in the protection and monitoring zones seasonal hunting bans could occur. Certain restrictions exist regarding the use of live decoy birds and there are special inspections in the area of breeding of game birds.

L. de GRANDES refers to the economic effects of AI on the hunting sector. AI has caused enormous losses in Spain, in particular in the area of intensive breeding of red partridges, which are not easy to keep indoors. Furthermore, insurance companies are refusing to cover any economic failures. He calls on the Commission not to take arbitrary measures in this field.

M. KYPRIANOU answers that although there are generally valid EU regulations, these depend on the local conditions and level of risk in the area concerned. The specific problem of how to ensure game birds are not infected is currently being discussed and considered at the *Standing Committee*. Considering the beginning bird migration and the fact that Spain was one of the first countries reached, close contacts are maintained with the Spanish authorities. He refers once again to the co-operation with hunting organisations, whose contribution to monitoring is very useful, in order to observe and report irregularities.

R. SEEBER asks about the possibilities of virus transmission to mammals and further, whether and in how far the Commission has envisaged making compensation payments to poultry farmers.

V. MATHIEU would like to know if, in case of a spread of AI, a total ban on hunting would be enforced or if the extermination of migratory birds would be conceivable. Furthermore, he would like to know more about the deployment of hunting dogs in such a case.

M. EBNER asks how long has the virus been known about. Furthermore, he reminds participants the EP unanimously approved PARISH report of December 2005, in which hunting organisations and hunters, on the basis of their presence, should be included in the monitoring of lands. He would like to know to what extent the Commission has taken account of this suggestion of the EP.

R. STURDY inquires whether there is a connection or similarity between the H5N1 virus and Spanish Influenza

M. KYPRIANOU explains once again, that the monitoring system in place across the whole EU has proved itself as the correct measure; no one could have predicted such a harsh winter in the East, which resulted in the migration of swans to Western Europe, originating from the Danube Delta. The migration of birds in spring created new worries about birds that migrate from other parts of Europe, so that a spread of the virus can be expected, wherefore monitoring measures should also be extended.

Regarding transmission to mammals, he was not surprised about the case detected in Germany, as it had already been seen (infection of tigers fed with chicken in Thailand) that the virus was transmissible. Through the hunting ban in the 3km and 10km-monitoring zone, hunting dogs, as well as humans, will be protected. As long as the search for further information about the virus continues, no spread should be recorded and as few constraints outside of both zones should be implemented. The hunting organisations, like others, should be included as partners for the surveillance of outbreaks, increasing death rates, etc, as has been officially confirmed.

Regarding "Spanish Influenza", he confirmed that it is a form of the influenza, but is not connected to the current H5N1 virus and the circumstances surrounding both are not comparable. While his sphere of responsibilities covers the costs for the monitoring and protective measures, the question of support of poultry enterprises in the form of compensatory payments is the area of the Commissioner for Agriculture M. FISCHER-BOEL. In certain cases, for example when the public is affected, Member States may request financial assistance - these requests will certainly be considered.

3. Avian Influenza and the Conservation of Wild Birds from the Point of view of the DG ENV (M. O'BRIAIN)

M. O'BRIAIN explains that the task of his department is to provide support with the best possible ornithological information and data. Since September of last year, DG ENV has been working very closely with DG SANCO, as the problem of AI concerns a number of different areas of expertise.

He confirms that it has become clear in the interim that migratory birds spread the virus. This is a threat to the conservation of wild animals that must be taken very seriously. It has been confirmed that already 5% of the worldwide Bar-headed Goose population has been eradicated. This shows that the virus can have a significant effect on bird populations. That this topic has found its way onto the global agenda, illustrates the different planned debates of different global organisations, such as the Convention for Biological Diversity or a meeting of the Migratory Birds Commission in Nairobi. At the end of last year, an agreement was concluded with *Wetlands International* and *EURING* to obtain the best possible ornithological data about AI and migratory birds, as well as their migration paths in and around Europe. They are in contact with the respective national organisations and so can facilitate an international exchange and engage, in close co-operation, the responsible veterinary authorities responsible for the management of AI.

In relation to hunting, he makes clear that on the basis of the "Birds" Directive there is a definite right to hunt, based on national law. Therefore, he refers to the argumentation of Commissioner KYPRIANOU. What may cause fears however, is the arbitrary killing of wild animals as a precautionary measure. This is mentioned due to rumours to this effect originating from parts of Greece and Belgium. He recalls that all wild bird species are protected under the "Birds" Directive, and can be reduced only on the condition of exceptions. In accordance with this condition, a harvest of wild birds on the basis of precautionary measures is strictly refused.

Finally, he explains that DG ENV will continue to work closely with the other Commission services concerned and that monitoring and the collection of ornithological data will be pursued intensely, as at the moment the collection of scientific information is not given enough attention.

R. STURDY emphasised that no responsible hunter makes indiscriminate shots and that the hunting community strongly objects to any "preventive" culling of wild birds. This is more of a fear factor fuelled by other sectors.

T. HOGGARTH asks about further developments on the topic of vaccination. As already infected and later vaccinated birds can still transmit the virus, there are currently discussions in England as to whether, in such cases all poultry in the affected region should be slaughtered on grounds of emergency.

N. PARISH refers to the often-short lifespan of poultry, which raises questions about the use of vaccination. Furthermore, he would like to know to what extent the Commission is active in the observation and research of the obvious changes in bird migratory routes, as on the basis of climate change these routes can no longer be predicted.

B. van GOETHEM confirms that, despite vaccination, the virus can be transmitted through poultry. Two vaccinations are required, the price of which exceeds the value of the poultry itself. Both vaccination pilot-projects are underway in the Netherlands and initially three, but now one French department and one hope that these will provide a detailed overview of the effectiveness of such vaccinations. Based on the Asian incidence of transmission of the virus to a mammal, it was not surprising for the Commission that such a case would occur in the EU. As long as such cases occur in protective zones, then they do not pose a great danger to humans. He emphasised that future incidences of AI, even those that can be attributed to the impending bird migration in spring, are definitely predictable, even if it can be assumed that this is highly probable.

M. O'BRIAIN states that regarding bird migration routes DG SANCO has already collected a great amount of data, however, these are somewhat simplified, given that further changes are difficult to predict. He makes clear that there will be a very close co-operation and continuity in the data collection, so that the ornithological results can lead to an even better investigation of future developments.

At the end of the debate, Y. LECOCQ points out that hunters are concerned in many ways. Firstly, because they are the first to come in contact with dead birds (thus they must be well informed about the virus), secondly, because unwarranted restrictions on the practice of hunting may be implemented and thirdly, because due to potential virus induced population extermination, hunting may no longer be possible. He once more reiterates that FACE does not support the spread of extermination of wild birds and points out that surveillance done by hunters is part of the solution and not the problem. He stresses the role of European hunting community in the on-site monitoring of the AI situation and that a reduction in or a ban on hunting without convincing arguments can break the wild animal health barometer.

R. STURDY suggests that given the importance of the topic, the Intergroup should be brought up-to-date about AI in autumn.

4. Any other business

No other topics are raised in this part of the agenda.

5. Next meeting

The next meeting will deal with the general topic of the "countryside". Members will be informed about the date of the meeting in due time.

R. STURDY thanks all speakers and participants for their active participation and closes the meeting.

Max von STEYNITZ
Public Affairs Assistant