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Bournezeau, 10th of February 2017

Letter to the European Institutions about **the epidemic of the avian flu in Europe/the World**

Dear Sir, Dear Madam,

It is with great concern that we are following the developments of the avian flu in the European Union. As an association for the protection of animals in France we would like to share with you our thoughts about an industry, that in our opinion, in the long term is ethically, environmentally and economically unsustainable.

The low pathogenic variants of the avian flu virus are everywhere, and are present in wild birds, especially water birds, throughout the whole year. They are the normal carriers of the low pathogenic avian flu viruses. Once the virus is spread amongst domestic birds it is the high concentration of animals in poultry production, with birds that have a weaker immune system because of their breeds and their short lifespan and so have no time to build up immunity, that have caused the virus to mutate to the harmful and highly pathogenic avian flu viruses, in both extensive as intensive/industrial farming. This has been proven likely for the H5N1 virus as well as the H5N8 variant. According to a statement of Wetlands International in 2015 « none of the birds they sampled over the years was positive for the disease-causing avian influenza H5N1 known as the "bird flu" virus» and «wild birds are very unlikely to disperse disease-causing virus strains over extensive distances.»¹

It seems that the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds co-convened by the United Nations Environment Programme/Convention on Migratory Species (UNEP/CMS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shares that opinion. On December 19th 2014, it released a statement on "H5N8 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in poultry and wild birds". In this statement the Task Force urges agencies and organisations « to ensure there is no consideration of killing of wild birds or negatively affecting wetland habitats as potential disease control measures » as this would not solve the main problem that viruses become more pathogenic and more dangerous. It is farming of poultry per se that poses a danger, not only to wildlife, but also to humans.

Animal diseases like the avian flu are a major health risk to humans. The 1918 flu pandemic that killed over 50 million people in 1918/19 was a form of swine flu that crossed the species barrier to infect humans. Former Director-General of the WHO Dr Lee Jong-wook said in a speech in 2005 : "...It is only a matter of time before an avian flu virus - most likely H5N1 - acquires the ability to be transmitted from human to human, sparking the outbreak of human pandemic influenza. We don't know when this will happen. But we do know that it will happen..." He was proven right when a pandemic in 2009/10 that claimed around 19,000 lives was found to be made up from four different flu viruses: North American swine influenza, North American avian influenza, human influenza and an Asian/European swine influenza virus. As we write this, avian flu in humans is

¹ <https://www.wetlands.org/casestudy/avian-disease/>

being reported in many countries around the world.²

The consumer is becoming more and more aware of animal welfare. For example all over Europe retailers are switching over from battery hen eggs to free range/outdoor eggs. And this is a very good development that should not be reversed. Because of the current avian flu epidemic, farmers are obliged to keep their animals indoors. Taking into account the stress and its effect in suppressing the immune system and that some types of birds, like geese and ducks, are not adapted to be housed and with the growing demand by the public of free-range eggs and poultry, keeping birds inside is not going to be an option to stop and prevent further transmission of the infection in the long term.

Biosecurity measures are claimed to be the solution to stop contamination of the highly pathogenic virus but how effective is this when it is likely that contamination can even take place indirectly by mice, rats or even flies? On the 25th of January 2017 the European Commission updated the EP Committee of Agriculture and Rural development on the on-going Avian Influenza epizootics. In its report the European Commission also mentioned that « solid scientific evidence about the real efficacy of the biosecurity measures is often lacking or is not quantified ».

In the case of an outbreak the European Union follows the recommendations of the World Organisation for Animal Health and orders the systematic culling of poultry, which is carried out in the most atrocious ways. Thousands of animals need to be killed in a very short time. They are gassed in gas chambers or slaughtered (with or without stunning) in mobile or regular slaughterlines. In some countries the birds have even been burned or buried alive or their necks have been wrung to kill them. In any of these cases welfare is being compromised. Over the last few years, 100s of millions of poultry have been culled or have died after being contaminated by the virus of the avian flu and many wild birds have suffered the same fate.

Vaccination does not seem to be available, applicable and economically viable. So this does not seem to be an option.

Our association is located in France where mainly the foie gras sector has been victim of the avian flu outbreak this year. It is planned to reimburse the farmers for their losses. The foie gras sector only provides jobs to a very small percentage of the French population. The demand for foie gras has decreased every year for the last 4 years. Foie gras is very bad for humans' health. Yet millions of euros are being put into a sector that does not even respect the European legislation with regard to animal welfare. Ducks are still being kept in individual cages and even though research, the latest by the University of Cambridge³ has concluded that force-feeding compromises the duck's welfare, force-feeding is still carried out in most of the foie gras farms in France and other foie gras producing countries in the EU. To continue to support such a sector is not only unacceptable, but also irresponsible because of the health risk posed by avian flu.

The avian flu outbreaks have led to enormous losses in the poultry sector all over Europe, all over the world. The compensation of farmers in the EU is paid by tax-payers' money, our money. For the 2016/2017 outbreaks a couple of hundred million Euros have been reserved by the EU to compensate farmers for their losses. How can the EU justify that the public pays for an industry that poses a potential threat to their own health?

Animal welfare measures for poultry are largely underestimated and underdeveloped in the EU. Just some examples : the major welfare problems of the parent /grandparent animals for the production of broilers⁴, the welfare problems associated with genetic selection of breeds for meat

² <http://www.oie.int/en/animal-health-in-the-world/update-on-avian-influenza/2017/>

³ Professor Donald M. Broom of the University of Cambridge « The Welfare of Ducks during Foie Gras Production »

production like broilers and turkeys⁵, artificial insemination of ducks mainly kept in cages, artificial insemination of turkeys, the high density in which poultry is being kept, the loading, transport and slaughter problems (ineffective stunning), culling of 1 day old ducklings and chicks not useful for the industry, laying hens still kept in cages and even with the facilities provided to them, the conditions in which they live are highly inappropriate. Ducks are kept inside barns or on muddy fields without proper water basins/ponds⁶, barn fires, accidents while transported to the slaughterhouses, long distance transport through the EU etc. etc. etc.

And last but not least the environmental aspects of animal and poultry farming and its impact on climate change. One of the world's leading drivers of climate change is animal agriculture.

We think that it is time that governments should take their responsibilities not by condoning this industry but by thinking in the long term, by phasing out poultry farming in particular and livestock farming in general, and by supporting financially, the development of alternative sources of protein. It is unacceptable to keep on pretending that we can go on like this, to continue to give farmers hope for a future that isn't there in animal farming, to continue knowing that diseases like the avian flu pose a real potential danger to human's health.

We ask the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Members of the European Council to stop, as a start, turning a blind eye to the unacceptable practices with regard to the foie gras industry in the EU. We also would like the European Union to be more specific and more clear about the negative effects of the consumption of animal products, and to encourage the production of plant based proteins/replacements for animal products not only for the sake of humans' health, but also for the animals, for the environment, for fairness and a better distribution of food over the whole world, and last but not least to combat climate change. For more information we would like to refer to our contribution to the public consultation on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy published on our website Antispeciesism.com.

Yours sincerely,

Marit de Haan
President of NALA 85480

4 **Scientific Opinion on welfare aspects of the management and housing of the grand-parent and parent stocks raised and kept for breeding purposes**

5 <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/EN/1-2016-182-EN-F1-1.PDF>

6 **“Ducks out of Water” A report on the UK duck industry by Juliet > Gellatley (BSc Zoology), founder and director, Viva!**