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**ANIMAL HEALTH FORUM ON AVIAN INFLUENZA**

**Policy to Action: The case of avian influenza –**

**Reflections for Change**

**(90 SG/8)**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global recurrence and spread of high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) is a worldwide threat to the poultry sector, impacting livelihoods of farmers, stakeholders and can have severe consequences for food security, biodiversity and a public health pandemic potential.

HPAI has resulted in the death and mass slaughter of more than 500 million poultry worldwide between 2005 and 2022. The mass culling of poultry incurs huge costs to government and industry, heavy economic losses for farmers generating a long-lasting impact on their livelihoods and raises societal and environmental concerns.

Despite the efforts of WOAHA Members to implement strict prevention and control measures such as movement control, enhanced biosecurity and stamping out, avian influenza continues to spread. There is a need to discuss the strategic challenges that impede Members to progress towards global control, explore control options, and reach a consensus on suitable science-based disease prevention and control alternatives, that can reduce the burden of the disease.

The Technical Item of the 90th General Session of the World Assembly of Delegates of the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) held in Paris, from 21 to 25 May 2023 presented by Dr. David Swayne (USA) titled: “Strategic Challenges in the Global Control of High Pathogenicity Avian influenza” provided a comprehensive review of the unprecedented shift in the epidemiology and ecology of the HPAI, the challenges this brings and possible solutions for consideration. The Technical Item set the scene for the Animal Health Forum (AHF), a new discussion format being introduced for the first time at the General Session, to explore among Delegates and other participants to the GS, the challenges for the global control of HPAI as laid out in the technical item.

The AHF was divided into four themes that spanned 3 two-hour sessions covering issues on surveillance and monitoring for early detection and prevention, disease control strategies for prevention and control, trade aspects and global co-ordination. The AHF was preceded by a high-level panel discussion, including Ministers, other senior government officials, and high-level officials from FAO and WOAHA where their perspectives on the global spread of HPAI, major concerns and actions needed were discussed.

This multipronged approach aimed to facilitate a rich discussion and debate among WOAHA Delegates, producers and subject matter experts around science-based disease control strategies required for the global control of HPAI.

## 2. TECHNICAL ITEM ‘STRATEGIC CHALLENGES IN THE GLOBAL CONTROL OF HPAI’

The rapporteur, Dr. David Swayne, set the scene by providing a comprehensive review of the unprecedented shift in the epidemiology and ecology of the HPAI, the challenges this brings, and possible solutions for consideration, whilst highlighting the impact of HPAI on poultry, public health and biodiversity. The Technical Item provided a common background understanding of the situation and the basis for further discussions on what is needed to tackle these challenges.

The technical item is available [here](#).

## **2.1. Session 1: Avian influenza intelligence- Surveillance and monitoring for early detection and prevention**

### **2.1.1. Background**

Changes in the ecology and spread of the HPAI virus in the last several years requires a reflection on the objectives, strengths and gaps of current surveillance and monitoring systems to enable early detection in wild migrating birds and in poultry to inform risk assessment and rapid action. Sharing data and collaboration across sectors is essential to assessing the risks to the poultry industry, wildlife health, biodiversity and public health, and to developing mitigation strategies.

### **2.1.2. Objectives**

- Explore the challenges of designing and implementing effective integrated surveillance and monitoring strategies targeting domestic and wild animals,
- Discuss different approaches and opportunities to improve systems nationally and internationally.

### **2.1.3. Panelists**

Christine Middlemiss (The United Kingdom, Delegate); Roland Dlamini (Eswatini, Delegate); Frank Wong (Australia, WOA Reference Laboratory for avian influenza and Chair OFFLU Executive Committee); Thomas Mettenleiter (Germany, FLI).

### **2.1.4. Key messages**

- Given the dynamic nature of the spread and evolution of the virus in wild birds, there is a need for international sharing of timely surveillance data to inform national early warning and risk assessment. This helps to inform risk management decisions and adjust directives based on changing levels of risks in different locations and settings along the flyways.
- A One Health approach is needed to ensure all sectors (animal health, wildlife health and public health) are contributing to intelligence gathering and bringing their expertise and perspectives to the table not just *ad hoc* or as needed but on an ongoing basis.
- Surveillance must be adapted for different target population and production systems including smallholders or backyard farms, and commercial production setting. To ensure a holistic view, surveillance in wild birds, terrestrial and aquatic mammals, domestic birds and other possible mammalian hosts, including humans is needed.
- Major gaps in capacity and insufficient or inconsistent resources for surveillance in some regions result in data gaps which must be addressed. There are particular challenges and barriers to conducting surveillance in many non-commercial settings and in wildlife, thus different approaches and strategies are required.
- There is a need for global coordination on wildlife monitoring and surveillance, in particular targeting migratory birds, acknowledging epidemiological implications and biodiversity challenges and explore possible prevention and control options, drawing on wildlife expertise and involvement of the wildlife focal points.
- Enhanced biosecurity, including in backyard farms is especially challenging given the interface with wildlife. Practical, implementable approaches that are appropriate for the social and cultural context are needed to protect livelihoods and food security, especially in low-middle income countries.

## **2.2. Session 2: Response: Disease control strategies for early response and business continuity, including vaccination**

### **2.2.1. Background**

Currently countries that were previously able to control HPAI through conventional methods have been overwhelmed by the scope of the response and are considering adding vaccination, zoning and compartmentalisation as complementary tools to biosecurity, movement control and stamping out. During this session the socio-economic and policy barriers and opportunities for effective implementation of avian influenza disease control strategies were identified.

### **2.2.2. Objectives**

- Share country and industry perspectives on the challenges to implement an effective and safe vaccination programme including vaccine strain selection, availability, delivery (cost resources, logistics); surveillance and monitoring for early detection of infection and transmission and to demonstrate disease freedom,
- Discuss the feasibility of using zones or compartments as strategies for controlling HPAI in the current context.

### **2.2.3. Panelists**

Nicolò Cinotti (International Poultry Council, Secretary General); Emmanuelle Soubeyran (France, Delegate); Joris Vandeputte (International Alliance for Biological Standardization); Baoxu Huang (People's Rep of China, Delegate); Mbargou Lo (Senegal, Delegate); Ximena Melón (Argentina, Delegate)

### **2.2.4. Key messages**

- Many WOAHA Members are facing unprecedented numbers of HPAI outbreaks and are often responding to several outbreaks simultaneously which is putting considerable pressure on financial and human resources. Additional tools such as compartmentalization, zoning and vaccination are being considered to complement biosecurity and movement control which are the cornerstone of avian influenza prevention and control.
- WOAHA Members and the private sector face shared challenges and need to work closely together through private-public partnerships to manage risks and devise and implement prevention and control measures for HPAI by strengthening the Veterinary Services.
- Zoning and especially compartmentalization, are underutilized tools in the management of HPAI and are needed to protect the health status of flocks, ensure business continuity and to facilitate disease control.
- Some countries have successfully used vaccination for many years to reduce the transmission of HPAI. A successful vaccination strategy, always includes a vaccine that match the field strains and be accompanied by robust disease surveillance. Others are assessing the technical capacity to implement the vaccination and socioeconomic implications of various epidemiological scenarios to ensure an informed decision on whether to implement a vaccination programme. This decision should include a consultation with the private sector. International guidance is needed for planning vaccine strategies, monitoring its efficacy and the accompanying surveillance to demonstrate absence of virus transmission.

- A large expansion of vaccine platform technologies allows for the quick updating of vaccines based on new field strains and capacity to produce safe and efficacious vaccines. The ability to differentiate field and vaccine strains is critical. Testing of different platforms and readiness for surge production needs to be done in peacetime.
- To help smallholders to control HPAI, capacity building throughout the value chain is required including outreach to raise awareness of biosecurity measures such as disinfection, construction of chicken coops to prevent/limit contact with wild birds, and measures to prevent of zoonotic transmission. Appropriate monitoring and surveillance targeting wild birds and in live markets, in addition to surveillance in domestic birds is important.
- There is a need for all parts of the poultry/bird value chain to champion, implement, recognise and adhere to WOAHP international standards and take a risk-based approach in preventing and managing avian influenza risks.

### **2.3. Session 3: Resilience: International standards to facilitate international trade**

#### **2.3.1. Background**

The WOAHP Terrestrial Code provides provisions to prevent the spread of HPAI while avoiding unnecessary trade barriers. These provisions consider the use of vaccination for HPAI, provide recommendations for surveillance, the use of zoning and compartmentalization, and recommendations for safe trade. Despite the adopted standards, Members have reported challenges to trade of vaccinated animals and to recognise the principles of zoning and compartmentalization when outbreaks occur in a HPAI free country or zone. During this session solutions to ensure safe trade in poultry and poultry products in line with international standards were discussed.

#### **2.3.2. Objectives**

Explore barriers and opportunities for better implementation of standards, in the context of vaccination, zoning and compartmentalization from the perspective of importing and exporting countries and identify steps needed to address trade-related concerns.

#### **2.3.3. Panelists**

Masatsugu Okita (Japan, Delegate); Ben Dellaert (International Eggs Commission); Eduardo de Azevedo Pedrosa Cunha (Brazil, Delegate); Bernard Van Goethem (European Commission); Rosemary Sifford (USA, Delegate)

#### **2.3.4. Key messages**

- Trust between trading partners is essential for achieving safe international trade. Trust is built through transparent and timely information sharing on HPAI relevant information, including occurrence of circulating strains and on national HPAI control, prevention and surveillance programmes.
- Trade partners require evidence that vaccination programmes are rooted in robust scientific foundations. The vaccination programme and the required surveillance to ensure the absence of viral circulation among vaccinated populations should be practically feasible and economically sustainable. Comprehensive consensus among Members, the scientific community and relevant stakeholders is therefore needed.

- Zoning and compartmentalisation can be used effectively by infected countries to maintain trade if there is transparency in data sharing to allow trading partners to clearly understand how the concept is being used. The use of compartmentalisation, despite being used by many countries has been harder to be recognised by trading partners.
- Exporting countries with established trade agreements based on recognition of existing sanitary measures may be deterred from modifying their avian influenza national control programmes, such as implementing zoning, compartmentalisation or introducing vaccination programmes as this could imply prolonged cumbersome re-negotiations discussion with trading partners. Members are urged to respect the adopted international standards.
- There could be benefits for a more active role of WOAAH in facilitating Members understanding and implementation of WOAAH standards in the context of international trade, and supporting Members in resolving differences in this regard, such as implementing the WOAAH informal procedure for dispute mediation (Terrestrial Code Article 5.3.8.)
- WOAAH standards include disease specific standards, both in the Terrestrial Code and in the Terrestrial Manual, as well as horizontal standards on matters such as animal health surveillance, vaccination, zoning and compartmentalization which should be used by Members as the basis for the development of their national programs, as they have been developed through consensus and were adopted by all Members.

## **2.4. Session 4: Global coordinated strategy for progressive control of avian influenza**

### **2.4.1. Background**

The response to the global avian influenza threat must involve coordinated actions by international organizations, governmental agencies (e.g., Veterinary Services, wildlife managers, public health authorities), poultry producers, pharmaceutical industry, scientific institutions, development partners and other stakeholders to prevent further spread of HPAI viruses. Under the GF-TADS umbrella, a task force has been established to review and update the 2008 Global Strategy on AI to address the current epidemiological context.

During this session, the opportunities to strengthen regional engagement were discussed drawing upon the varied experiences and resources to operationalize a strategy at national, regional, and global levels.

### **2.4.2. Objectives**

- Showcase the support available through the WOAAH and OFFLU scientific network,
- Share experiences of regional coordination strategies and the role of GF-TADS leadership in global and regional coordination,
- Provide an update on the global coordination and outreach to ensure a practical strategy to reduce the impacts of HPAI.

### **2.4.3. Panelists**

Ian Brown (The United Kingdom, WOAAH Reference laboratory and Chair of OFFLU Steering Committee); Jack Shere (USA, GF-TADS Americas); Thanawat Tiensin (FAO, Director), Montserrat Arroyo (WOAH, Deputy Director General).

#### 2.4.4. Key messages

- WOAHO Reference Laboratory Network OFFLU network ([www.offlu.org](http://www.offlu.org)) provides Members, scientific community and avian influenza vaccine producers with essential and impartial scientific data, which includes tools and expertise in disease management and data on existing registered circulating strains to facilitate vaccine matching. This essential initiative strongly relies on the sharing of data from countries and scientific communities, the involvement of volunteering experts and need to be continuously supported by adequate resources.
- GF-TADs is an FAO-WOAH established mechanism to enable communication, coordination and collaboration between partners at regional and global levels, including representatives from sub-regional organizations and private sectors. Seeking to provide an enabling environment for Veterinary Services to successfully prevent and control transboundary animal diseases. It encompasses systemic vision, clear disease management objectives and is supported by transversal as well as diseases specific approaches, such as the Standing Groups of Experts on avian influenza.
- International organisation and implementing partners such as WOAHO, FAO, regional economic communities have a responsibility towards their membership and donors, to avoid duplication and address gaps in a coordinated, cohesive manner at the different levels and stages of planning and implementation of activities and programmes. In this way, resources are used in an optimal manner towards a common objective.
- The revised Global Avian Influenza Strategy under the GF-TADs will aim to provide Members a multicentric governance mechanism to coordinate efforts at global and regional level and receive support under an integrated One Health approach. The Global Strategy will enhance transparency and access to epidemiological data, diagnostics in domestic animals and wildlife to support planning, preparedness and outbreak management practices, using lessons learnt from previous experiences and driving investment for innovation.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The Animal Health Forum on High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza was a welcome addition to the 90th WOAHO General Session agenda. Many attendees including WOAHO Delegates, industry representatives and other partners expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to actively engage in this science-based policy discussion which brought together diverse viewpoints. The discussions highlighted that avian influenza is a One Health problem and must be tackled through a holistic ecosystems health approach. The ongoing dynamics of the disease require work and dedication from WOAHO, its Members and all stakeholders going forward. Trust, transparency and collaboration will be critical to address this disease threat and the challenges it brings.

The continuing global epidemic of HPAI has revealed the gaps in surveillance data and associated inequities in surveillance capacity in different parts of the world which need to be addressed. There were concerns raised about the challenges faced by low-income Members where poultry is essential for food security and to support the livelihoods of families. WOAHO and FAO, under the GF-TADS in collaboration with WHO, have the mandate and governance mechanisms to address regional differences and work with partners to support capacity building for surveillance, as well as leveraging on the many existing programmes and tools to support countries in HPAI prevention and control. In this regard, OFFLU is an important partner in providing diagnostic expertise and vital genetic and antigenic information to enable matching of vaccines to field strains.

Zoning, compartmentalisation and vaccination are being considered by some Members. It is clear there remains much work to be done, in particular with regards vaccination design and its supported legislation and policies to ensure acceptance. There will not be a one size fits all approach and further guidance is



needed to provide direction to implement the provisions in the WOAHP Terrestrial Code to minimize impacts on trade and economies.

Resolution 28 on the Technical Item associated with the Animal Health Forum outlines the recommendations for WOAHP, its Members and other partners to deal with the global threat of HPAI. The resolution is available [here](#).