

Third Meeting of the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds: Reviewing the Global Issue and Assessing Future Priorities



Bonn, 24 March 2010 - On the 15 and 16 March 2010 the Third Meeting of the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds took place at the FAO Headquarters in Rome, Italy. The meeting was convened by FAO and UNEP's Convention on Migratory Species (CMS).

The Task Force was established in 2005 to create a liaison mechanism between those international organisations and multi-lateral environment agreements (MEAs) engaged in activities related to the spread of H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) of Asian lineage. It comprises representatives and observers from 14 international organizations, including four UN agencies.

The third technical workshop reviewed what has been achieved in addressing the spread of HPAI H5N1, both in terms of the Task Force's original objectives, as well as obligations under relevant MEAs, and determined the future role and direction of the Task Force. It built upon outcomes of Task Force meetings held in 2006¹ and 2007² each of which helped develop a common international understanding of the direct and indirect implications of this disease for bird conservation and broader disease control.

Focus was set on current activity related to avian influenza surveillance, including most recent research related to the epidemiology of HPAI H5N1, known direct and indirect impacts on the conservation of waterbirds and wetlands, and most recent developments with respect to national contingency planning and response strategies.

¹ http://www.aiweb.info/documents/nairobi_conclusions_recommendations.pdf

² http://www.aiweb.info/documents/aviemore_ai_workshop_conclusions_and_recommendations.pdf

In the past six months, outbreaks of the virus have occurred in domestic poultry in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Romania, Egypt, Indonesia, India, and Vietnam and in wild birds in China, Mongolia, and the Russian Federation. Concurrent with the Task Force meeting, Bhutan reported outbreaks for the first time and the virus was detected again in Europe.

The disease has had great and varied conservation implications including inappropriate responses such as culling wild birds and destroying their habitats. Poor farm bio-security and infected poultry trade are the main causes of disease spread. Wild birds play a much smaller role in the H5N1 HPAI ecology, but understanding their role in this disease, and managing the associated risks is still a key priority for the future.

In the context of wild bird conservation, it is significant that the views of many have moved from an often automatic blame of wild birds for every outbreak of HPAI H5N1, to more balanced positions that recognize that the poultry sector (especially in East Asia) is the primary reservoir of this virus, with regular spill-over of infection into wild bird populations (and with possible onwards transmission). Such changed awareness is greatly welcome and better reflects current scientific understanding.

Concerning the surveillance of avian influenza, some 750,000 wild birds have been tested for H5N1 HPAI worldwide over the past five years. Only an extremely small number of infected wild birds have been found, suggesting that infection of poultry from wild birds is rare and the risk to humans from wild birds is negligible. On the basis of this information, the Task Force discussed several options for surveillance, including a stronger emphasis on passive surveillance or targeted active surveillance.

All partner organizations provided extensive feedback on the above-mentioned topics and on the future objectives and priorities of the Task Force. The participants agreed on the following issues to be further developed in the future:

- Standardization of reporting and sampling methodologies to current best science-based practices;
- Use the flyway approach for continued and broader surveillance of wild bird populations, along with better understanding of migration routes, habitat use, and movements;
- Strengthening of capacity for outbreak investigations that evaluates the source of virus introduction;
- Reduction of indiscriminate blame of wild birds for poultry outbreaks, in the absence of proper evidence

Another subject of utmost importance to the third Task Force meeting was the conservation impacts of HPAI H5N1. There is a whole array of such impacts, both direct and indirect, and a document is being prepared to evaluate current threats and identify prospective opportunities to approach these.

Among the knowledge gaps there is an urgent need for better understanding of the interactions between farmed ducks, farmed wild ducks and wild waterbirds in driving HPAI emergence in East Asia. This should include investigating the relationship between climate, environment and onset of disease in populations. This should especially focus on situations where rice production systems involve grazing with domestic ducks, as well as considering those factors facilitating disease persistence in these agricultural wetlands.

The Task Force has provided a valuable, and extremely cost-effective, coordination function between its many collaborating organizations. The participants agreed that it should continue to convene and to ensure dissemination of relevant information to governments and other interested parties.