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**International community calls for urgent action to improve preparedness for further outbreaks of avian influenza**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The third meeting of Parties of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement concluded its recent meeting in Dakar, Senegal with an urgent call to improve national contingency planning related to the potential spread of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (subtype H5N1 — HPAI) and to work on being able to provide better information, both at the national and the flyway level, into the debate on how to assess risks and formulate responses in relation to the interface between wild birds and avian influenza.

Discussions on avian influenza dominated this inter-governmental conference that took place from 23-27 October. The issue was introduced to the meeting by Ward Hagemeijer of Wetlands International, speaking on behalf of the Scientific Taskforce on Avian Influenza. A number of concerns were expressed. These included:

- ◆ lack of capacity in many countries to respond adequately to the threats posed by HPAI. This relates both to those countries where outbreaks have already occurred as well as to those regions, importantly including Africa, but also the Middle East, to which it could spread;
- ◆ potential implications for agriculture and livelihoods, notably poultry-keeping; human health; the sustainable use of wild birds (especially waterbirds); the conservation of bird species, most notably already threatened species; and the major potential economic and social impacts in those areas where migratory birds and domestic keeping of birds support the livelihoods of human populations, such as in many parts of Africa.
- ◆ the realization that the impact of HPAI in Africa will most likely be different from the impacts currently being witness in Europe and W-Asia. Whereas in Europe mostly the poultry sector is affected, causing economical losses, Africa is more likely to suffer strong direct impacts on the livelihoods of local communities, with many people keeping poultry at small scale in and around villages for direct food and income generation.
- ◆ the consequent need for assistance from the international community to developing countries in enhancing preparedness and capacity; and
- ◆ the need to urgently take forward a number of crucial research needs to allow better assessment of risk and consequent responses.

There was important acknowledgement that transference of HPAI by wild birds was just one means by which the virus appears to be spreading, and it is just as important that strong attention be given to addressing other means of actual or potential spread. These include:

- the movement of poultry;
- (movement of) other avian livestock and cage birds;
- associated activities to service the respective industries;
- both the legal and illegal trade in birds; and
- movements of people;

However the relative importance of these different modes of spread appears to differ between countries and is maybe changing.

AEWA stressed the crucial need for accurate information on the current situation to be widely disseminated both nationally and internationally given the sometimes highly distorted views reaching the public on risk factors and necessary responses, and called for the development and implementation of programmes of education and public awareness on HPAI, especially aimed at those actually or potentially affected by outbreaks of avian influenza, in particular those engaged in outdoor activities and the poultry industry.

The Resolution, while in no way downplaying the potential severity of the situation recalls that all currently known cases of human infection with HPAI have been through contact with infected poultry rather than through contact with wild birds.

Also strongly supported were the conclusions of the World Health Organisation, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Organisation on Animal Health, that attempts to eliminate HPAI in wild bird populations through lethal responses such as culling is not feasible and should not be attempted, not least since it may exacerbate the problem by causing further dispersion of potentially infected birds. Rather, strong biosecurity measures — such as those which successfully stamped out the outbreak of avian influenza (subtype H7N7) in The Netherlands, Germany and Belgium in 2003 — should be adopted to reduce risk of cross-infection between poultry and wild birds.

In national responses, which are now urgently required to the current situation, Contracting Parties were strongly urged in their planning and execution of national response strategies to develop fully integrated planning approaches that bring together and incorporate virological, epidemiological, medical, ornithological and wildlife management expertise.

African countries were strongly urged to co-ordinate their responses to the threats posed by the spread of HPAI through the New Partnership for Africa's Development, as well as widely to disseminate the conclusions of the meeting within their countries as an important element of awareness raising.

## Notes for Editors

1. The Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA), the largest of its kind developed so far under CMS. It was concluded on 16 June 1995 in the Hague, the Netherlands and entered into force on 1 November 1999 after the required number of at least fourteen Range States, comprising seven from Africa and seven from Eurasia had ratified. Since then the Agreement is an independent international treaty.

The AEWA covers 235 species of birds ecologically dependent on wetlands for at least part of their annual cycle, including many species of divers, grebes, pelicans, cormorants, herons, storks, rails, ibises, spoonbills, flamingos, ducks, swans, geese, cranes, waders, gulls, terns and even the south African penguin.

The agreement covers 117 countries from Europe, parts of Asia and Canada, the Middle East and Africa. In fact, the geographical area covered by the AEWA stretches from the northern reaches of Canada and the Russian Federation to the southernmost tip of Africa. The Agreement provides for coordinated and concerted action to be taken by the Range States throughout the migration system of waterbirds to which it applies. Of the 117 Range States currently 49 and (52 countries as of 1. October 2005) have become a Contracting Party to AEWA.

2. The third Meeting of Parties was attended by **146** representatives of **49** Contracting parties, together with **29** representatives of other range states and **12** international and national organisations concerned with the conservation and wise use of migratory waterbirds and their wetland habitats.

3. The Press Release from the Scientific Task Force on Avian of Monday 24 October can be found on the AEWA and CMS website. ([www.unep-aewa.org](http://www.unep-aewa.org) and [www.cms.int](http://www.cms.int))

4. The opportunities for further information exchange provided by the Special Round-table on the spread of HPAI (19 November 2005, Nairobi, Kenya), during the next meeting of the Scientific Council of the Convention on Migratory Species was noted and strong African participation urged.

5. MoP3 Resolution 3.18 on Avian Influenza is appended.



Secretariat provided by  
the United Nations Environment Programme  
(UNEP)

Agenda item:  
Doc: **AEWA/Res. 3.18/Rev 2**  
Date: **27 October 2005**  
Original: **English**

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**3<sup>rd</sup> SESSION OF THE MEETING OF THE PARTIES TO THE AGREEMENT ON THE  
CONSERVATION OF AFRICAN-EURASIAN MIGRATORY WATERBIRDS (AEWA)**

*23 – 27 October 2005, Dakar, Senegal*

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RESOLUTION 3.18

AVIAN INFLUENZA

*Concerned* by the recent spread of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza subtype H5N1 (HPAI) from South-East Asia to Western Asia and Europe;

*Conscious* that HPAI has significant actual or potential implications for agriculture and livelihoods, notably poultry-keeping; human health; the sustainable use of wild birds (especially waterbirds); the conservation of bird species (especially those with small populations and/or which are highly localised); and further, that there may be major economic and social impacts in those areas where migratory birds support the livelihoods of human populations, especially in Africa;

*Mindful* that all currently known cases of human infection with HPAI have been through contact with infected poultry rather than through contact with wild birds;

*Noting also* that the HPAI is considered to have been spread between countries through a number of different vectors including through the movement of poultry, other avian livestock and cage birds and associated activities to service the respective industries; through both the legal and illegal trade in birds; movements of people; and through the migration of waterbirds, although aware that the relative significance of these means of spread varies spatially and temporally;

*Conscious* that recent outbreaks in Turkey, Croatia and Romania more strongly suggest that migratory birds play a role in the transmission of HPAI along flyways;

*Aware* of AEWA's participation in the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza convened in late August 2005 by the Convention on Migratory Species, which comprises representatives and observers from nine international organisations, including four UN bodies;

*Acknowledges* the opportunities for information exchange provided by the Special Round-table on the spread of HPAI to be held on 19 November 2005 at Nairobi, Kenya, during the next meeting of the Scientific Council of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and encourages the participation of all African CMS Scientific Councillors;

*Noting* the major involvement and role in this issue of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), notably through the publication in May 2005 of a *Global Strategy for the Progressive Control of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza*, and its implementation, *inter alia*, through regional programmes of *Emergency Assistance for Early Detection and Prevention of Avian Influenza* and concerned that the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza should contribute appropriate expertise to current international initiatives, without duplication of effort;

*Recognising* the particular importance of extensive and long-term data sets relating to bird movements (including ring recovery data), and waterbird counts (notably the International Waterbird Census coordinated by Wetlands International) as an essential information resource that can allow the exploration of possible scenarios of the current HPAI spread including areas of higher relative risk along migratory flyways, and possible policy responses to outbreaks, as well as the important need to support and further develop future monitoring of waterbird populations and assessment of their migratory flyways;

*Welcoming* the major contributions of technical expertise made by Wetlands International to the consideration of these issues, but in this regard also noting the need urgently to analyse relevant data holdings and other information;

*Noting* that development of surveillance schemes and contingency planning will need to be determined nationally, but that there are benefits for co-operation, sharing of information, protocols, capacity, and resources between countries;

*Concerned* that in many countries there is significant lack of information, or misinformation, on important issues related to the spread of HPAI, the risks it may pose, and how to anticipate and respond to outbreaks of HPAI;

*Further concerned* that ill-informed responses may have unfortunate and possibly disastrous long-term consequences for conservation, especially for some of the species which already have small populations and are globally threatened especially those species listed in Column A, Category 1 of Table 1 of the Agreement's Action Plan, and those species listed in Appendix 1 of the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species;

*Recalling* that the Global Flyways Conference (Edinburgh 2004) called, in particular, for urgent action to assess disease risk, and establish monitoring programmes in relation to migratory waterbird movements, the trade of wild birds, and implications for human health;

*Recalling also* that the outbreak of H7N7 in The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany was successfully stamped out in 2003 using rigorous control and biosecurity measures, and further welcomes biosecurity measures being taken in the European Union in response to the most recent outbreaks;

*Noting* that a key objective in responding to HPAI should be that essential genetic resources should in principle remain unaffected;

*The Meeting of the Parties:*

1. *Calls* for urgent responses to the spread of HPAI including the development of national surveillance schemes and contingency planning which should involve measures which are both immediate, and those which relate to longer-term needs;

2. *Calls also* for very urgent attention from the international community (including bird ringing schemes such as AFRING) for the support of capacity building within Africa related to the essential need to promote the biosecurity of domesticated poultry as well as the rapid development of surveillance programmes for HPAI in populations of both wild and domesticated birds, and monitoring of the movements of wild birds;
3. *Encourages support* of initiatives by IUCN and Wetlands International for a regional meeting in Africa to enhance monitoring and surveillance mechanisms, and co-operation, related to the need to identify and eliminate HPAI;
4. *Requests* Contracting Parties and urges non-contracting Range States to develop and implement programmes of education and public awareness on HPAI, especially aimed at actually or potentially affected stakeholders, in particular those engaged in outdoor activities and the poultry industry;
5. *Strongly supports* the conclusions of WHO, FAO and OIE that attempts to eliminate HPAI in wild bird populations through lethal responses such as culling is not feasible and should not be attempted, not least since it may exacerbate the problem by causing further dispersion of infected birds;
6. *Emphasises* the need quickly to research and establish the data and analysis required to enable or improve risk assessments by:
  - clarifying virus behaviour:
    - i) in different waterbird populations (especially viral incubation periods, the infectious period in birds and the symptoms affecting individual wild birds), as well as determining their survival rates; and
    - ii) in the aquatic habitats which are waterbird breeding, staging and non-breeding (wintering) areas;
  - establishing informed assessment of the possibility of transmission from wild populations to domestic flocks, including by non-waterbird species found near poultry-keeping areas;
  - clarifying prevalence of HPAI in wild bird populations;
  - identifying the nature of migration routes and timings for key migratory waterbirds so as to expand and/or refine existing ecological monitoring of these populations;
  - developing a combined risk assessment based on the known behaviour of the virus, risks of transmission, routes and timing of migratory species, as well as known poultry husbandry techniques; and
  - improving farming standards and developing strategies to limit the risk of any disease transmission between wild and domestic birds;
7. *Urges* Contracting Parties in their planning and execution of national response strategies to develop fully integrated approaches to address the issues raised by the spread of HPAI that brings together and incorporates virological, epidemiological, medical, ornithological and wildlife management expertise;
8. *Strongly Urges* that Contracting Parties, especially those in Africa, urgently to disseminate this Resolution widely within their administrations, and to relevant agencies, institutions and organisations, such that it may be used for information and as a basis of planning national responses to the potential spread of HPAI;

9. *Requests* that African Contracting Parties and non-contracting Range States coordinate their responses to the threats posed by the spread of HPAI through the New Partnership for Africa's Development;
10. *Recommends* that special attention and monitoring by veterinary authorities in those areas holding waterbirds that may have migrated from regions where there have already been outbreaks of HPAI;
11. *Urges* in particular that hunting communities, in the framework of existing hunting activities, contribute to monitoring the spread of HPAI and co-operate actively with national authorities in the event that measures, *inter alia*, special temporary hunting regulations are considered or put into force;
12. *Urges* Contracting Parties, other Range States and international organisations to support research and monitoring related to disease processes in wild bird populations given the potential significance of these in terms of bird conservation and population regulation, so as to be better prepared for the future management of avian disease outbreaks; and
13. *Instructs* the Secretariat to continue to contribute to the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza, engaging with relevant expertise within AEWA's Technical Committee and Contracting Parties, and assist the Task Force to disseminate to Contracting Parties, the media and others, clear information and scientific assessments related to the developing situation.