

STOP DUCKING HARD FACTS AND TOUGH POLICY OPTIONS ON BIRD FLU, SAYS NEW SCIENTIFIC TASK FORCE

International Scientists warned today against panic responses based on the assumption that wild birds are the only cause of avian flu, and called for

- *regulation of animal markets*
- *global surveillance of avian influenza in wild birds*
- *precautionary suspension or restriction of the global wild bird trade*
- *improved standards in poultry farms, farming and marketing practices and enhanced quality control of animal vaccines*
- *identification of the precise migratory routes of waterbirds and the highest risk location along different flyways.*

The Task Force, comprising representatives and observers from 9 different international organizations including 4 UN bodies, also seeks much better data and information on the cause of the spread of the disease. It warned that several globally endangered species of birds could be wiped out by the killer disease, including the Lesser White-fronted Goose, Red-breasted Goose, Barheaded Goose, Swan Goose, Oriental Stork and Siberian Crane.

Bonn, October 24 – A new task force on avian influenza comprising scientists and conservationists, convened by the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), called today for urgent action to combat the root causes of the outbreak. It warned against growing hysteria and a “one-eyed” approach in the media which grossly over-simplifies the causes of the flu outbreak, and the methods needed to counter-act it in the interests of human and animal health.

They emphasized the uncertainty of knowledge on key issues including how the virus is transmitted between domestic and wild birds. They advocated an approach based on combined risk assessment and a research programme funded by Governments and international agencies to answer 3 key questions, framed under the guidance of Professor Colin Galbraith, Chairman of the CMS Scientific Council:

1. How does the flu virus behave in wild birds that catch it, and how long can it survive in the aquatic habitats that are breeding, staging and non-breeding (wintering) grounds for the birds?
2. How is the virus actually being transmitted between domestic and wild birds?
3. Which migratory routes and specific locations can we pinpoint as posing the highest levels of risk both to and from migrating birds, including globally threatened species?

The Task Force commended the European Commission for its early, and sympathetic, approach to bids for research funds. They called on other global and regional donors to follow suit, to co-operate in jointly funded programmes and to avoid duplication and maximize new knowledge.

The Task Force also called for much greater emphasis by Governments and local authorities on combating the role of factory-farming, trade in live poultry, and wildlife markets which provide ideal conditions for the virus to spread and mutate into even more dangerous forms.

Task Force observer William Karesh, Director of the Field Veterinary Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society said:

“We are wasting valuable time pointing fingers at wild birds when we should be focusing on dealing with the root causes of this epidemic spread which are clearly to be found in rural poultry practices, the movement of domestic poultry, and farming methods which crowd huge numbers of animals into small areas where they are much more susceptible to disease, and where the physical conditions provide ideal conditions for a virus like H5N1 to spread and mutate. On top of this we face a global and domestic wildlife trade in which literally tens of millions of birds and other animals flow through crowded wildlife markets which provide a further opportunity for humans, domestic and wild animals to be over-exposed to pathogenic viruses.”

The Task Force supports tough controls on international and domestic trade and transportation of wildlife and poultry:

“If we are serious about combating H5N1, one step we should take now would be to suspend global trade in live wild birds as this simply adds one more risk to all the others”, said John O’Sullivan of Birdlife International, who is also a special CMS scientific councilor for birds.

The Task Force warned against the use of uncertified vaccines to protect birds. Some have already been found to increase resistance to drugs. Taej Mundkur, Asia-Pacific Migratory Waterbird Conservation Strategy Coordinator of Wetlands International, explained:

“The key to vaccines is quality control. In some countries vaccines are helping to control the spread of the disease, and they have a role to play as part of a package of measures, for example in the rice growing areas of Southeast and South Asia where separation of domestic and wild bird flocks is impracticable under current farming regimes.”

The Task Force is strongly opposed to any general policy of culling wild birds. Jan Veen, associated expert of Wetlands International, presently working for them on avian influenza and migratory birds, commented:

“Quite apart from the effects on wild bird populations, many of which already suffer from habitat destruction or other man-made threats, all the evidence suggests that slaughtering wild birds as a crude form of disease control would be counter-productive, because it would interfere with group migrations, and disperse individuals or small groups of birds over a much wider area, thus magnifying the risks of contact with domestic birds. The same applies to measures aimed at destroying or reducing wild bird natural habitat at known aggregation points.”

The Task Force emphasized the need for a case-by-case approach, based on local conditions and sound science. Niels Kanstrup of the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) said:

“ We have to get away from the misconception that wild birds are the main problem when in fact

they are in many ways the victims of this disease. Hunters and their local organizations have an important role to play in detecting and reporting any new outbreaks as well as supporting Government and conservation bodies in the additional research and monitoring likely to be required over an extended period.”

The Task Force also considered a list of 36 waterbird species which are already globally threatened in the wild, and are felt to be especially vulnerable to avian influenza. These include the Lesser White-fronted Goose, Red-breasted Goose, Swan Goose, Oriental Stork and Siberian Crane (Full list attached in Annex). Already the population of the Barheaded Goose (a species restricted to central and southern Asia) has been severely affected by the disease: during May-July 2005 about 10 % of the total estimated population of about 52-60,000 individuals died of AI in China.

Peter Bridgewater, Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention noted that “As the global convention dealing with wetlands and waterfowl, we are concerned that panic about Avian Influenza will promote knee-jerk negative actions to both birds and wetlands. Neither birds nor wetlands are proven culprits at this time, so wise management of these resources, as well as clear and unambiguous human health precautions, is the way forward.”

Task Force Convener, Robert Hepworth, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Migratory Species, concluded

“ The risks to animal health from the existing avian influenza epidemic are real. There is little doubt that it originated within poultry farms, and then infected wild birds which are victims as well as vectors of the virus. As a result, thousands of wild birds have already died, and millions of domestic birds have been slaughtered, resulting in major economic losses, often to poor communities.

“ Now there is also a very real concern that a further mutation could lead to a pandemic affecting millions of humans. The best chance of avoiding this is to take measures addressing the root causes and based on the best possible knowledge. We know what to do on the animal side – improve farming standards, restrict live animal markets and trade, step up research quickly, ensure quality control of animal vaccines, establish a global programme to monitor the occurrence of avian influenza among waterbirds along their migratory routes and avoid counter-productive measures like culling wild birds, or destroying their habitats. It is essential to help developing countries to acquire sufficient capacity to implement such central measures.

“We hope the media will now present a more balanced picture, focusing on the facts and the action we can take to reduce the risks of a human pandemic being added to the existing tragedy for birds”.

ANNEX

List of Eurasian migrant Globally Threatened bird species considered to be at particular risk from Avian Influenza

John O'Sullivan, BirdLife International and CMS Scientific Council

IUCN threat status is shown in brackets (CR=Critical; EN = Endangered; VU = Vulnerable)
Where appropriate, CMS Appendix is given as CMS I and/or II

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* VU CMS I
 Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* VU
 Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes* VU CMS I
 Japanese Night-heron *Gorsachius goisagi* EN CMS I
 Milky Stork *Mycteria cinerea* VU
 Oriental Stork *Ciconia boyciana* EN CMS I
 Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* VU
 Greater Adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius* EN
 Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* EN CMS I
 Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* CR CMS I & II
 White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* EN CMS I & II
 Swan Goose *Anser cygnoides* EN CMS I & II
 Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* VU CMS I & II
 Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis* VU CMS I & II
 Baikal Teal *Anas formosa* VU CMS I & II
 Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris* VU CMS I & II
 Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri* VU CMS II
 Scaly-sided Merganser *Mergus squamatus* EN CMS II
 Steller's Eider *Polysticta stelleri* VU CMS I & II
 Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus* CR CMS I & II
 Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* VU CMS II
 White-naped Crane *Grus vipio* VU CMS I & II
 Hooded Crane *Grus monacha* VU CMS I & II
 Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* VU CMS I & II
 Red-crowned Crane *Grus japonensis* EN CMS I & II
 Swinhoe's Rail *Coturnicops exquisitus* VU
 Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personata* VU
 Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* CR CMS I & II
 Wood Snipe *Gallinago nemoricola* VU CMS II
 Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* CR CMS I & II
 Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* EN CMS I & II
 Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* EN CMS I & II
 Saunders's Gull *Larus saundersi* VU CMS I & II
 Relict Gull *Larus relictus* VU CMS I
 Chinese Crested-tern *Sterna bernsteini* CR CMS I
 Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis* VU

NB This list (total 36 species) should be regarded as indicative rather than the final word. In particular, it does not include purely African migrant species, which might be affected if avian influenza reaches that continent. Nor does it include true seabirds, birds of prey and passerines associated with wetland habitats, all of which may be at some risk.