



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
2 Marsham Street
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12 December 2022

Dear Secretary of State

Avian Influenza

I am writing to you following our discussion of avian influenza at your appearance before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 6 December.

You recognised that we are currently experiencing the largest and longest outbreak of avian influenza in history. The risk of disease outbreak, on top of rising input costs continues to bring increased uncertainty for poultry producers, affecting the financial viability of the sector and having a profound effect on farmers' mental health. Urgent action is needed to both address the immediate needs of the sector and to manage the longer-term impact this virulent strain of the disease is likely to have. We are therefore calling on the government to:

Strengthen the compensation package

The Committee welcomed the changes to the avian influenza compensation package in October, allowing compensation to be paid to farmers at the outset of planned culling rather than the end. This allowed compensation to be paid earlier, which has provided some welcome relief, but has not addressed the issue of which birds farmers are compensated for.

The current compensation regime is fundamentally unfair as compensation is only paid for healthy birds that are culled. However, due to the highly pathogenic nature of this strain of the virus, a large number of birds die between identification of the virus and the affected flock being culled. This means that the level of compensation received depends on how quickly the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) can arrive to undertake the cull, with those at the back of the queue being much less likely to receive a fair level of compensation. This can have a particular impact on smaller producers who keep birds in a single location and can lose their entire flock during an outbreak. **The Committee calls on you to revise the Avian Influenza compensation scheme so that compensation is paid based on the number**



of birds alive in the affected flock at the point of disease notification rather than the number of birds that are culled.

Support the sector's restocking effort

At the hearing on 6 December, you recognised that farmers are making restocking decisions now and are reviewing their plans for future years. If the sector is not able to restock, the supply issues we are seeing will continue to get worse, making the UK more reliant on imports and undermining our food security.

Currently farmers must either wait for 12 months after an outbreak before restocking, or pay for the deep cleaning of sheds where affected birds were housed. **Please can you set out how you will support farms seeking to restock following an avian influenza outbreak?** As a minimum, if the Department is not willing to broaden the compensation scheme in the way we have suggested, we believe that it should provide financial support for deep cleaning of sheds to enable growers to restock as soon as possible.

Ensure APHA is sufficiently resourced

At our hearing with stakeholders on 29 November, there was widespread praise from the panel of the work that the APHA is doing in response to this outbreak, and the Committee thanks the APHA for their vital efforts. It is essential that the APHA has the capacity to cope if there was a further disease outbreak such as foot and mouth or African swine fever, alongside avian influenza. The completion of the APHA's Weybridge redevelopment is essential to ensure the Agency has the capacity required in the long term. **Can you provide an update on what conversations you have had with the Treasury minister to ensure the necessary funding is made available for this project?**

Review the Government's strategy for mitigating the disease in wild birds

On 16 November, the Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs told the House of Lords that avian influenza is now endemic in the wild bird population in this country. The Government's Mitigation Strategy for Avian Influenza in Wild Birds in England and Wales must be revisited in light of this development. In particular, we heard evidence that there is a need for greater research in patterns of transmission and action to ensure that carcass removal is effectively managed between the different organisations that share this responsibility. **The Committee calls on you to publish an updated mitigation strategy by March 2023, which should explicitly address future research priorities and the issue of carcass management.**



Support the development and deployment of vaccination

On 1 November, the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries told the House that “as with covid, vaccination will be the route out of this problem.” However, as you will be aware, vaccination of poultry and most captive birds for avian influenza is not currently permitted in the UK and currently many countries will not allow the import of meat from animals that have been vaccinated for avian influenza. We have taken evidence that the currently available vaccine is not suitable for this current highly pathogenic strain and therefore there is an urgent need internationally to develop an appropriate and efficacious vaccine. **Can you set out what support the Government is providing for the development of a vaccine? Can you also explain what work Defra is doing to address the regulatory and trade barriers that might stop the roll-out of any vaccine that is developed?**

I would be grateful for a reply by 6 January.

I am publishing this letter on our Committee website.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Goodwill'.

Sir Robert Goodwill
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee