

Defra urged to put in place vaccine plan

Small scale poultry keepers have joined forces to lobby Defra for the establishment of a preventive vaccination policy for avian influenza.

The 14-strong group of organisations—including the British Waterfowl Association, the Poultry Club of GB and the Henkeepers Association—is urging the government to put in place a plan now in case vaccination is deemed necessary in the future.

“What bird keepers want is a policy. We are not asking for vaccination now,” says Dr Chris Ashton of the British Waterfowl Association. “But our organisations are poorly represented at meetings with Defra and not in a significant proportion when faced with the demands of the commercial poultry industry.”

Dr Ashton argues that while the majority of commercial poultry farmers can house their flocks and rely on biosecurity as a preventative measure, many smaller keepers of poultry do not have that option.

“Members of the organisations which support a vaccination policy keep their birds outdoors—some for 24 hours a day—and a move indoors risks seriously compromising welfare. And in some instances, such as with ducks and geese, housing is simply not possible.”

The group is urgently pressing Defra to:

- Agree a vaccination plan for free range and organic poultry, hobby birds and pure breeds.
- Submit the plan to Brussels for approval in time for autumn 2006 without months of delay in putting a policy in place.
- Ensure there is sufficient vaccine available to stock a preventative vaccination campaign.

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help and support with sourcing replacement flocks and Deans Foods, who take eggs from the two units, have said that they will stock his houses ahead of their own production sites if necessary. *Comment page 22*

Perhaps surprisingly, considering the wide-ranging views on the merits of vaccination as a control method, there was support for the move from a broad cross-section of stakeholders at a meeting held by Defra earlier this month.



Geese cannot be confined to a house

BFREPA vice-chairman John Widdowson participated in the meeting where he reaffirmed the Association’s support of the government’s current stance on vaccination.

“If we can avoid going down the route of vaccination then that has to be the preferable option but on the other hand it would be prudent to at least make plans for the eventuality, rather than find ourselves facing crucial delays further down the line,” said John.

“I know many free rangers are worried about what will happen if we are faced with a prolonged shut-in. While we’re confident we can ensure bird welfare is maintained we know that after 12 weeks the eggs will lose their free range marketing status.

“Vaccination could give us a way out of that situation—an option Dutch producers were offered earlier this year—but it’s no use waiting until week 11 before thinking about it. It makes good sense for Defra to put plans in place now and also ensure that supplies of vaccine will be available if required.”

Defra confirmed at the meeting that it currently holds no vaccine bank.