



FSS Lárionad Faire
um Chosaint Sláinte

25 - 27 Sráid
Ghairdinéir, Baile Átha
Cliath, D01A4A3, Éire

HSE Health Protection
Surveillance Centre

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13th May 2024

Deputy Réada Cronin
Dáil Éireann,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2

Re: To ask the Minister for Health if he will, or is already, liaising with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine on current/future surveillance and preparation for a possible bird flu outbreak in livestock and for physical protections and testing for workers and produce in the dairy and related industries in the event of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Cronin,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response.

“On 1/4/2024, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States reported an unprecedented outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 in dairy cattle. Since February 2024, this outbreak has been detected in dairy herds in at least eight US states. A single mild human case was identified in a US dairy worker in an affected farm in late March – no further human cases have been identified since. Illness in cattle has been mild and symptoms transitory, the main clinical feature being an abrupt and temporary fall off in milk production. High levels of A/H5N1 virus have been detected in milk samples on affected farms.

Sampling of the national US retail pasteurised milk supply has identified H5N1 viral fragments in about 20% of milk samples. These viral fragments are not infectious to humans. Subsequent follow up testing by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on retail samples of pasteurised milk, and a range of dairy products, including cottage cheese and sour cream, which contained these viral fragments found no live virus capable of transmitting infection. Testing - in the US - of powdered infant and toddler formula - and has also proven negative. The US Department of Agriculture and the US FDA has declared that the US retail pasteurised milk supply is safe for human consumption. Research in the US is being undertaken on risks posed by raw milk containing H5N1.

The particular strain responsible for this outbreak is designated as A/H5N1 Clade 2.3.4.4b and is highly similar to the dominant strain of avian influenza circulating globally since 2020 and responsible for almost all outbreaks of bird illness and die-off. The source of infection in cattle is likely to have been infected local wild birds. This strain isn't showing any increased tendency to infect or spread between humans.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) reports that A/H5N1 has not been identified in cattle in the EU and causative genotype has not been identified in the EU. ECDC's assessment of this event is closely aligned with that of the World Health Organization and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization which determine that the overall public health



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risk posed by H5N1 is considered to be low, and for those exposed to infected animals or contaminated environments in affected areas to be low-to-moderate. H5N1 has not been identified in cattle in Europe. The strain responsible for the US cattle outbreak has not been identified in Europe.

National work is underway to assess the wider potential impact of the US incident.

Already in place:

- Work in assessing the wider potential impact of the US incident is being undertaken by the HPAI National Coordination Group (NCG) supported by HSE's Health Threats Preparedness Programme and the National Health Protection Office. The NCG monitors and coordinates the national response to avian influenza and is a standing subcommittee of the joint Department of Health and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) One Health Oversight Committee. This cross-sectoral group comprises human health, animal health, food safety and emergency planning experts.
- A/H5N1 Clade 2.3.4.4b guidance on the management of contacts and cases of avian influenza in Ireland was published in November 2023.
- Our national Dynamic Risk Assessment of this incident which will guide our approach, nationally and in conjunction with European partners, assesses the current risk to Ireland cattle and human population to be low.
- The HSE undertakes a range of routine, close systematic monitoring for human influenza including at hospital and GP level
- DAFM monitors the global avian influenza activity in birds and undertakes avian surveillance in Ireland. In addition, DAFM undertakes examination of mammals that may have been infected with avian influenza

Priority planned work:

- The HPAI NCG meets regularly and is meeting again on 14/5/24 to review the US situation and develop plans to address this threat.
- The national A/H5N1 guidance will be extended and updated to manage any potential introduction of this infection into Ireland. This will include procedures and protocols to safeguard the national dairy based food supply including necessary biosecurity measures, and to protect occupational and other contacts working with cattle and their products, through the use of training, infection and prevention control measures, and personal protective equipment.
- The HSE Operational Pandemic Plan is being updated to include the learning from the COVID-19 pandemic and is at a late draft stage. The most likely cause of the next pandemic will be an influenza virus. With this in mind, a Command Post Exercise to test the Pandemic Plan using a simulated incident involving introduction of an avian influenza that affects cattle as well as humans and birds, is in development and will be held on at a date to be confirmed over the summer period."



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If you require any further information or clarification, please do contact us.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Martin', written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Gregory Martin

Director of HPSC

25-27 Middle Gardiner Street

Dublin 1.

MRN: 409474