

# Wetlands International

## Position Statement on Avian Influenza

(update per 4 Nov 05)



Wetlands International is member of the Scientific Taskforce Avian Influenza (further referred to as 'the Taskforce') and part of the text of this position statement reflects the position of the Taskforce.

Since 1997, the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) of the H5N1 strain has been increasingly recorded in east, southeast and central Asia through recurrent outbreaks in poultry, cases in wild birds and infections in people. The H5N1 avian flu has infected 122 people and killed 62 in Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia and has resulted in the culling of several hundred million domestic poultry and ducks. It has become entrenched in poultry flocks across much of Asia and has crept into Europe.

HPAI can be spread through movement of poultry, eggs, meat and bird products, poultry and live bird markets, illegal trade of wild birds, movement of humans and machinery between poultry farms, the religious practice of "merit release" of wild or pet birds and substandard poultry vaccines. The more recent patterns of spread into Europe could suggest that wild migratory birds play a role in transporting the virus over larger distances, although the hard evidence for this is still lacking.

At the same time wild birds are victims of this disease and it poses a threat to them, especially to those species that are already under threat or occur highly localised in specific sites. In 2005, a few species of migratory waterbirds were affected by the virus with mass die offs observed in two locations in China and Mongolia. Smaller numbers have been found to have died from this in Russia, Turkey and Romania.

As the role that wild birds could play in spreading HPAI is far from clear and the impact outbreaks of HPAI in socio-economic as well as ecological terms is not well understood, especially in continents like Africa and Asia, Wetlands International urges that more research is urgently done, that much greater awareness is developed and national preparedness plans are prepared and a world wide system for monitoring HPAI in wild birds be put in place. Practical measures to be taken to limit the risk of spread of the virus should focus on the control of movements of domestic poultry, trade and transport of wild birds and on improved bio-security practices in poultry production enterprises.

Considering our present knowledge about Avian Influenza H5N1 and the potential role of wild birds in spreading the disease, Wetlands international asks special attention for the following:

1. Avian Flu is a serious disease which is fatal for humans, domestic poultry (including chickens, ducks and geese) and wild birds. This means that human health, livelihoods, economic interests and nature conservation are at stake.
2. Several species of waterbirds have been affected by H5N1 and at least 29 threatened species in Eurasia are at risk. Up to 10% population of the Barheaded Goose has been wiped out in 2005 by the virus. Risk assessments and response strategies should factor in the need to maintain wild bird species in current population levels.
3. The conditions under which low pathogenic strains (LPAI) viruses mutate into HPAI viruses are poorly understood. However, it is likely that mutations to HPAI are especially facilitated by situations in which domestic poultry is kept, i.e. in large numbers, at high densities and in unhygienic situations.
4. At present there are no instances documented of HPAI being transmitted to humans by wild birds. Instead, all human cases have been associated with close contact with infected poultry.
5. The role of wild birds in the spread of HPAI-H5N1 over large parts of the Asian continent is unclear and unproven as wild birds are not known to be reservoirs of H5N1. However, the role of wild birds in outbreaks in Russia is speculative and with the spread into Europe it is becoming more likely that wild migratory birds are also involved. However, the role of illegal and legal movements of pet birds into parts of Europe linked to the virus spread needs to be further investigated.
6. Several measures can be taken in order to control HPAI as is suggested e.g. by the Food and Agricultural Organization, the World Health Organization, the Taskforce and many others. Such measures should focus on regulation of animal markets, strengthened and global surveillance for the disease in wild birds, especially in risk countries, precautionary suspension or restriction of the global wild bird trade and enforcement of legislation to prevent illegal movements birds, better control on movements of domestic poultry and improved standards in poultry farms, farming and marketing practices and enhanced quality control of animal vaccines, global surveillance of avian influenza in wild birds and last but not least identification of the precise migratory routes of waterbirds and the highest risk location along different flyways.
7. For several reasons culling of waterbirds, or destroying their habitats, is not an option in controlling HPAI. Such actions are immoral and in many cases illegal. Moreover, they should be regarded counter-

productive as they would interfere with the normal movements of migratory birds and can lead to unpredictable dispersion of individuals. Similarly, actions to drain habitats used by wild waterbirds should not be attempted as this would lead to the diversion of migratory waterbirds into other habitats not normally used by the birds. Such erratic movements of birds could put them at risk from picking infections from places not normally frequented by these birds or may provide a basis for them to pass on any infections that they may carry.

8. There is little known about the potential role of migratory waterbirds in spreading HPAI. This relates to the behaviour of the virus in wild birds and in the aquatic habitat, the chance of infected birds covering large distances, the timing of migration and the migratory routes of risk species and the chances of transmission at places where waterbirds concentrate during moulting, staging or during the non-breeding period (northern winter season). It is urged that these subjects are studied in detail and at the earliest.
9. The various programmes for monitoring, sampling and analysis of the viral subtypes of avian influenza found in wild birds should be intensified and included in a well co-ordinated monitoring network. Data should be centrally managed and made widely available.
10. There is a strong lack of capacity in many countries to detect and 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, including Africa, but also to S and W-Asia, to which it could spread; Furthermore the impact of HPAI in Africa and possibly also S Asia will most likely be dramatically different from the impacts currently being witnessed in Europe and Russia. Whereas in Europe mostly the poultry sector is affected (big poultry farms), 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 consumption and income generation. As a consequence, countries, especially those at risk of receiving avian influenza through migratory birds (e.g. many African and South Asian countries), should be supported in raising their preparedness for monitoring the situation and for developing and implementing a response strategy.
11. The assessment of the risks involved in a world wide spread of HPAI should be carried out by a multidisciplinary team of research workers including virologists, biologists, veterinarians, molecular biologists, epidemiologists, public health officials and other relevant disciplines.

Wetlands International strongly promotes a multidisciplinary approach to bring virologists, ornithologists and modellers together, in order to develop a world wide system for monitoring Avian Influenza in wild birds and to unravel possible mechanisms of disease transmission and to develop and implement responses. This initiative involves the Taskforce and is developed in close contact with the European Union (EU), World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). We seek cooperation with like minded bodies to enhance this important work.

Wetlands International has established a website devoted to providing information on AI and wild birds:  
<http://www.wetlands.org/iwc/avianflu>

Please also refer to the Taskforce press releases and resolution on the websites of CMS and AEWA:

[http://www.cms.int/news/PRESS/nwPR2005/pressrelease\\_AvianFlu\\_final\\_24\\_10\\_05.pdf](http://www.cms.int/news/PRESS/nwPR2005/pressrelease_AvianFlu_final_24_10_05.pdf)

[http://www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/en/mop/mop3\\_docs/daily\\_coverage/ai\\_press\\_release/aewa\\_wetlands\\_mop3\\_press\\_release\\_on\\_ai.pdf](http://www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/en/mop/mop3_docs/daily_coverage/ai_press_release/aewa_wetlands_mop3_press_release_on_ai.pdf).

**Terms used:**

LPAI: Low Pathogenic Avian Influenza (viruses causing no or only mild disease symptoms)

HPAI: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (viruses causing outbreaks of avian flu, with mass mortality and threat for humans to be infected)

H5N1: The Highly Pathogenic AI strain which has caused outbreaks of avian flu in Asia since 1997

For more information contact [post@wetlands.org](mailto:post@wetlands.org)

**Wetlands International** ([www.wetlands.org](http://www.wetlands.org)) works globally, regionally and nationally to achieve the conservation and wise use of wetlands, as a contribution to sustainable development. As part of its work it organizes and co-ordinates actions for the monitoring and conservation of waterbirds, and their habitats, all around the globe. The organization works with an extensive network of experts, including some 18 Specialist Groups and more than 15,000 observers and contacts in the field. On behalf of the Ramsar Convention, a database is managed with information on about 1500 wetlands which qualify as "sites of international importance" or Ramsar Sites. In January each year the International Waterbird Census (IWC) is organised, which includes more than 20,000 sites in more than a hundred countries to monitor waterbirds and wetlands.