

National Assembly for Wales All Party Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW)
9th May 2006

In Attendance:

- Les Eckford, Veterinary Surgeon, Environment, Planning and Countryside Department, Welsh Assembly Government
- Chair, Lorraine Barrett AM (Lab, Cardiff South and Penarth)
- Claire Lawson, RSPCA Cymru Wales
- Mick Bates AM (Lib Dem, Montgomeryshire)
- Roy Peckham, Pit Pony Sanctuary
- Alain Thomas, Greyhound Rescue Wales
- Kathryn Jenkins, Environment, Planning and Countryside Committee Clerk
- Angharad Penny-Evans, Assembly Members Research Service
- Huw Thomas, National Farmers Union Wales
- Barbara Windsor, Personal Assistant, Lorraine Barrett
- Lucy Merredy, Researcher and Press Officer, Lorraine Barrett
- Paul Pavia, Conservative Group
- Secretariat: Rhian Jones and Rahel Jones , Morgan Allen Moore Cymru

Apologies

- Lionel Ford, The Donkey Sanctuary
- Sian Edwards, Dogs Trust
- Jan Creamer, Animal Defenders, NAVS
- Tim Phillips, Animal Defenders, NAVS
- Suzanne Campbell, Protection of Wild Animals
- John Campbell, Protection of Wild Animals
- Ifan Lloyd, British Veterinary Association

Item 1: Chair's Welcome and Introduction

- Claire Lawson welcomed everyone to the committee and introduced the speaker, Les Eckford from the Environment, Planning and Countryside Division of the Welsh Assembly Government.
- Lorraine Barrett AM was delayed in a Meeting with the Minister for Countryside, Planning and Environment, and joined the meeting five minutes later.

Item 2: Presentation on Avian Influenza

Les Eckford made the following points during his presentation:

- Tackling avian flu meant dealing with the disease situation, looking at control factors, examining and reducing effects on the industry and ensuring welfare implications were considered.
- Explained that avian influenza is circulated constantly and that people should not just consider the H5 N1 strain of the virus.
- Outlined that there were three main types of avian influenza, but that it was type A that was of main concern as it was the type that could affect humans.
- Stressed that a full understanding of the epidemiology of wild birds was lacking at present and that this was regrettable.
- Clarified that within the Type A virus of Avian Influenza there existed different combinations of proteins that could possible occur, and that while some incidences of proteins were found in isolation, some combinations were more serious.
- In terms of specific proteins, those like H5 and H7 should not necessarily be associated with the disease.
- Referred to the case of Norfolk, where avian influenza was discovered and explained that in this case the disease had a low pathogenicity due to the combination of proteins.
- Reminded the committee that an outbreak of avian influenza could occur in poultry or wild birds, and that surveys of poultry as well as wild birds have been undertaken since 2005, and especially due to the H5 N1 outbreaks.
- Stated that many factors contributed and caused incidents of disease in birds, such as stress and the way birds are managed.

- Noted that the H5 N1 virus had a high pathogenicity, and could potentially infect humans as had been seen in South East Asia, whilst stressing that birds in South East Asia were kept in conditions that would never be seen in Wales, and that this contributed to incidence of disease.
- Due to the nature of the viruses and the combinations that can occur, no virus can be ruled out for its effect on humans, however an incidence of avian flu is not always serious.
- Stressed that avian influenza was a constant threat and that it could affect poultry at any time, adding that the fact that birds were now migrating out of Britain did not mean that the threat of avian flu would be going away.
- In terms of the transfer of virus from wild birds to poultry, Mr Eckford explained that there was no clear understanding of the full process involved.
- Stressed that a virus can change many times as it transfers between animals, and that it could pass through many animals and arrive from different sources to create different combinations of virus.
- Discussed measures to control any avian flu outbreak by drawing attention to a Pan European directive that had been issued which applied to all member states.
- Explained that the European directive allowed for control measures against infections with a low pathogenicity, which was important in tackling avian flu as viruses can change, and therefore could develop from a virus with a low pathogenicity into a virus with a high pathogenicity.
- Stated that regulations guided by the European directive were currently being drafted for Wales.
- Explained that the European directive included enhanced procedures for controlling avian influenza and that the most important words in the directive were “appropriate measures”, in order that measures to tackle disease were proportionate.
- Exemplified that it was not appropriate to “lock up” all birds in this country to control avian flu.
- Added that it was also vital to have a clear exit strategy as it would be hard to prove that the disease had gone away.
- Noted that avian influenza could potentially affect any bird or poultry unit, from large to small.
- Explained that the poultry industry was highly integrated, and that protection zones and restriction areas would have a massive impact, and were not always the most appropriate action, depending on the strain and levels of disease.
- Compared large commercial poultry units with smaller units in terms of housing, explaining that birds in commercial units were usually housed and therefore any restrictions and requirements to house birds would not affect them in the same way as small units and backyard flocks, where housing birds would be a drastic measure.
- Referred again to new legislation guided by the European Union, stating that it included risk assessments in order to measure the effects of control measures on the spread of disease as well as any implications for the industry.
- Discussed the contentious issue of vaccinations, explaining that vaccinations did have a value but should and could not hold the total solution to tackling avian influenza.
- Stated that the new directive allowed for birds to be moved following a veterinary risk assessment.
- Exemplified by stating that birds with a virus of low pathogenicity could potentially be moved for slaughter following a risk assessment, which could be beneficial to the bird’s welfare.
- Made the following points in relation to slaughter and animal welfare:
 - ❖ There would be a need to plan the movement of birds for slaughter in large commercial units
 - ❖ In an avian influenza outbreak there would be a need to kill infected animals rapidly
 - ❖ The slaughter of animals would be completed as humanely as possible, whilst bearing in mind that it would be vital not to place any humans at risk.
- Stated that gassing animals was currently used commercially in the slaughter of pigs and would be used in the case of an avian influenza outbreak on a farm, either through containerised gassing units or whole house gassing systems.
- Commented that slaughtering animals through injections would be used for back yard flocks, but that this would not be possible on a large scale when time was of the essence.
- Stressed that vigilance, good inspection and surveillance were vital in tackling avian influenza as it would allow for the detection of disease of low pathogenicity before it potentially developed into a more serious disease and ultimately allow for early detection of avian influenza.
- Tackled the misinformation that existed in terms of vaccinating animals explaining that:
 - ❖ People believe that vaccinating all birds will protect them from avian flu, but this is not true
 - ❖ Vaccinations vary in how they can be applied, and in the case of avian influenza vaccinations have to be administered in double doses and take up to three weeks to take effect. Even then, it does not fully protect the animal from avian influenza
 - ❖ Gathering birds to inject them with the relevant vaccine would cause stress for the animal and create a welfare issue.

- Explained that vaccinations would potentially be used in two cases:
 1. In the case of a large outbreak of avian influenza in order to allow the authorities to get ahead of the disease and get in under control. The animals injected would still need to be slaughtered at a later date.
 2. Proactively for birds of high genetic merit, where the destruction of the birds would be a huge problem and loss.

Item 3: Discussion and Q&A

- Lorraine Barrett AM raised the issue of pigeon clubs on behalf of a constituent, asking if housing these birds being near dwellings, or bringing them into social dwellings such as clubs and the back of skittle alleys, could pose a potential risk to residents and visitors.
- Mr Eckford responded that pigeon racing had been stopped but, as pigeons had proved to be more resistant than other birds to avian flu, the ban on pigeon racing had been replaced with a licensing situation, with certain controls imposed. Recommended that the residents should direct any queries to the local animal health officer.
- Mick Bates AM raised the issue of the structure of the poultry industry, and how the structure protected the industry from the potential impact of avian flu. Mr Bates noted that his constituency was a “hot spot” for a potential avian influenza outbreak, with many poultry units existing in the area. Mr Bates expressed his concern that the attitude in the UK towards vaccinating birds could potentially make poultry units vulnerable, especially small flocks. Mr Bates referred to the policy in Holland, where a two stage approach existed in terms of vaccinating birds.
- Mr Eckford explained that vaccinations in commercial units would only be used as a fire break, adding that if all birds were vaccinated, it would breed complacency which could lead to a failure to detect the disease in its early stages.
- Mr Bates argued that evidence showed that incidence of avian influenza reduced dramatically following vaccination, adding that multi-vaccinations were now also available which allowed for covering more than one strain of avian influenza with one vaccine. Mr Bates suggested that the refusal to offer any vaccinations could potentially lead to poultry owners suing the Government.
- Mr Eckford responded by explaining that even when vaccines had been administered in commercial units, research had revealed that the disease had continued in these units. He also added that avian influenza vaccines had great limitations, and that they did not offer full protection and the disease could be perpetuated. He explained that the geography of the UK meant that vaccination of all birds was not a suitable control measure.
- Mr Bates further expressed the concern of small producers from the game bird industry, who import a significant number of poultry, asking if there were controls in place to ensure that imported animals did not carry avian influenza.
- Mr Eckford confirmed that there were no restrictions in place in terms of the importation of birds but that the birds would be coming from flocks that had been tested and that trade requirements to monitor this exist.
- Mr Bates pointed out that testing was critical in tackling an avian influenza outbreak, and therefore questioned what quick, immediate tests were being used to detect avian influenza in birds.
- Mr Eckford informed the members that on site testing of birds could not be done as all testing occurs in a centre of excellence at Weybridge. Mr Eckford added that the quickest period of time in which a test for avian influenza could be done was a few hours.
- Angharad Penny-Evans enquired whether this test could differentiate between high and low pathogenicity disease.
- Mr Eckford explained that there was a three stage process whereby the tests would firstly detect if there was avian influenza present in the bird. Then a test would be completed to look at what strains of H and N proteins were present, before studying the genetic sequence apparent which would detect the type of disease that existed.
- Mr Peckham asked for confirmation that the vaccine does not rid an animal of avian influenza but merely reduces the symptoms.
- Mr Eckford confirmed that this was the case, adding that it also made the disease more difficult to detect.
- Mr Peckham also asked for reassurances that scenes recorded in other countries where live diseased poultry were bagged and buried, often alive, would not occur in the UK.
- Mr Eckford stressed that this most certainly would not happen in the UK, and such treatment would in fact be a criminal act. He added that all slaughter would be supervised by the state veterinary service.
- Huw Thomas enquired about the testing capacity in Wales.

- Mr Eckford explained that the expertise in this area was based in Weybridge, where UK and also samples from other countries were brought for testing.
- Claire Lawson asked for further clarification in terms of the game bird industry, and enquired if the power existed to go onto premises to test for avian influenza.
- Mr Eckford replied that game poultry are kept in a commercial environment and are therefore subject to regulations.
- Lorraine Barrett AM raised a constituency query regarding the keeping of budgies outdoors by persons, and whether these animals were at risk of avian flu.
- Mr Eckford confirmed that keepers of such animals should maintain high standards of bio-security and cleanliness at all times, regardless of the threat of avian flu, and if these standards were maintained there was not much cause for concern. He added that birds kept on back-yard and remote lands were at greatest risk from avian flu.
- Mr Peckham urged that more comprehensive guidance should be issued to bird keepers.
- Mr Eckford clarified that keepers should deal with any disease found in their animals, by consulting a veterinary surgeon. He counselled that a proportional response was key in tackling avian influenza.
- Chair, Lorraine Barrett closed the meeting by offering her thanks to Mr Eckford, suggesting he might return at a later date pending new developments.

Item 4: Dates of Future Meetings

The next APGAW meeting will be held on 27th June and will discuss the Animal Welfare Bill. Claire Lawson, RSPCA, invited suggestions for issues and speakers for the Summer Conference, which will be held on 19th July.