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Self-declaration of Belgium regarding the recovery of the HPAI free status in poultry

Declaration sent to the OIE on October 11, 2017 by Dr. Jean-François Heymans, Chief of Veterinary Services of the Belgian Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (AFSCA) and OIE Delegate for Belgium.

Situation of highly pathogenic avian influenza in Belgium - 2017

The H5N8 variant of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus was identified in Europe in November 2016, and the first case of HPAI infection in Belgium on February 3, 2017. It was a hobby farm holding captive birds (other than poultry, including wild birds, as defined by the OIE, this type of bird will be referred to below as "other birds"). Four other notifications were sent to the OIE during the months of February and March 2017, concerning wild birds found dead or moribund (swans, mallards, raptors ...).

On 1 June 2017, Belgium notified a new case of HPAI H5N8 to an amateur holder (hobbyist). This outbreak was the first of 13 close occurrences of clinical infections with HPAI H5N8, with the last outbreak detected on July 7, 2017.

- Eleven of these outbreaks have been confirmed in amateur holders of other birds.
- Two of these outbreaks were confirmed on 10 and 20 June 2017 in professional operators (less than 4000 head) providing the "amateur" sector but also holding poultry, which resulted in the loss of the OIE "free from influenza" status of Belgium. (cf outbreaks 11 and 13 of table 1)



These events were reported in the OIE World Health Information System (WAHIS). Each outbreak has been completely decontaminated in accordance with Chapter 7.6. of the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)* and the establishments were cleaned and disinfected (29 June for the second professional establishment).

The measures have been gradually lifted, taking into account the favorable epidemiological situation.

The event was closed on September 29, 2017, 3 months after the end of operations of the second outbreak holding poultry.

Outbreak	Begin date (OIE)	Province	Ownership	Introduced animals	Positive animals	Number of heads	% mortality	Source of infection
1	3 Feb 2017	OVL	Hobby	Wild	Guinea fowl, goose, pheasant	36	25	Wildlife
2	21 Feb 2017	VBR	Wild	Wild	Cygnus	1	/	Wildlife
3	1 March 2017	VBR	Wild	Wild	Duck	1	/	Wildlife
4	23 March 2017	LIM	Wild	Wild	Cygnus, duck	2	/	Wildlife
5	24 March 2017	BRW	Wild	Wild	Ducks, buzzard	3	/	Wildlife
6	1st June 2017	LUX	Hobby	?	Chickens	11	36.3	Wildlife?
7	13 June 2017	LUX	Hobby	Chickens	Chickens	25	40	Market
8	14 June 2017	HAI	Hobby	Ducks	Chickens	33	54.5	Market
9	15 June 2017	WVL	Hobby	Chickens and ducks	Chickens, ducks, turkeys	43	39.6	Purchase to #6
10	16 June 2017	HAI	Hobby	Duck	Chickens	26	80	Market
11	10 June 2017	WVL	Dealer	Ducks	Guinea fowls, turkeys	4047	12.5	Purchase to #8
12	20 June 2017	HAI	Hobby	Ducks and guin. fowls	Chickens and ducks	120	18.3	Market
13	20 June 2017	WVL	Dealer	Ducklings?	Ornamental hen (Brahma)	972	?	Investigation still ongoing
14	20 June 2017	NAM	Hobby	Ducklings?	Chickens	47	74.4	? Wildlife
15	20 June 2017	HAI	Hobby	Chickens	Chickens	20	95	Market
16	22 June 2017	HAI	Hobby	Ducks and turkeys	Chickens, g. fowls, turkeys, peacock	66	63.3	Market
17	23 June 2017	HAI	Hobby	Ducks	Chickens	78	15.3	Market
18	7 July 2017	LIE	Hobby	?	Silk hens	19	26.3	Wildlife?

Table 1: list of IAHP H5N8 outbreaks in Belgium, 2017.

Intensified control and surveillance in response to outbreaks

Measures in the outbreaks

Belgium has implemented a strict and structured strategy to stop the spread of the disease, eradicate the virus and decontaminate outbreaks. This control strategy incorporated the control measures mentioned in the EU Directive 2005/94 / EC¹.

All control measures and inspections were carried out by the FASFC (Belgian Health Authority).

¹ Directive 2005/94/CE du conseil, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32005L0094>



For outbreaks involving the two **professional holders with the presence of poultry**, restriction zones with a radius of 3 (protection zone) and 10 km (surveillance zone) have been defined. These provided for the prohibition of the movement of poultry, of their products (hatching or consumption eggs, manure, etc.), equipment and vehicles etc between poultry farms, the slaughter of poultry in infected premises, the confinement of poultry kept in the protection and surveillance zone, secure destruction of carcasses and contaminated equipment, cleaning and disinfection of infected facilities and the application of hygiene measures for staff, trucks, equipment, etc. . In total, about 5000 birds were killed in both premises.

Farms in the protection zone were visited and clinically investigated by FASFC inspectors. It is important to point out that these were only amateur owners (people holding a few dozen birds in their garden, in all cases less than 200 heads) having no connection with professional farms, traders or markets. The investigations, essentially clinical, all gave favorable results.

For outbreaks involving **amateur holders of other birds**, a 3 km buffer zone was defined around each outbreak and poultry kept in the infected establishment were slaughtered in accordance with Chapter 7.6. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code*.

Movements of birds and their products were banned in the buffer zone. In total, about 500 birds have been killed in the infected establishments of amateur holders of other birds.

Thirty days after the fallowing imposed on each outbreak and as no clinical sign of avian influenza was observed, each area was declared free from the disease and the 3 and 10 km restriction zones were lifted.

Contact farms

The Health Authority (FASFC) identified contacts between infected flocks and other poultry farms and examined possible sources of introduction of the virus. In addition, upstream and downstream tracing of all contacts that occurred during the month preceding the suspicion report were conducted by interviewing the owners.

In addition, farms that had provided products or poultry were visited to check whether the avian influenza virus was present. An epidemiological link was established between one of the professional holders and 9 of the other outbreaks, highlighting that the exchange of infected birds and material (eg transport baskets) in markets allowing the sale of live animals was the source of the spread of the virus. The origin of the infection in the index farm is not yet clearly identified.

After the infection of July 7th, 2017 in an amateur bird owner, no other outbreak was reported or detected by the monitoring program. The last cleaning and disinfection operations took place the week of July 10, 2017, they concerned the remaining amateur holders of other birds.



Laboratory analyzes

Samples collected in the infected establishments and in the contact farms were analyzed by the national reference laboratory Center for Veterinary and Agrochemical Studies and Research (CERVA) (see table 2 below). All analyses performed in the contact farms gave negative results, with the exception of the trader located in Menen (outbreak 13 in Table 1), for which only one animal gave positive laboratory results.

TEST_DESCRIPTION	Total
Inhibition of hemagglutination AFL for Highly pathogenic H5	281
Isolation AFL	13
Molecular test AFL	440
Molecular test H5	28
Pathotyping AFL	15
Grand Total	777

Table 2: analyses carried out by CERVA during weeks 22 to 30 (May 22, 2017 to July 22, 2017).

CERVA also conducted serotyping of isolated viral strains via the European reference laboratory, and highlighted a difference between strains isolated during the 5 February-March outbreaks and the 13 June-July outbreaks.

Figure 1 below shows the situation observed between 1 June 2017 and 7 July 2017 and indicates the location of infected farms as well as restricted areas.

Restriction zones in Belgium due to highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N8

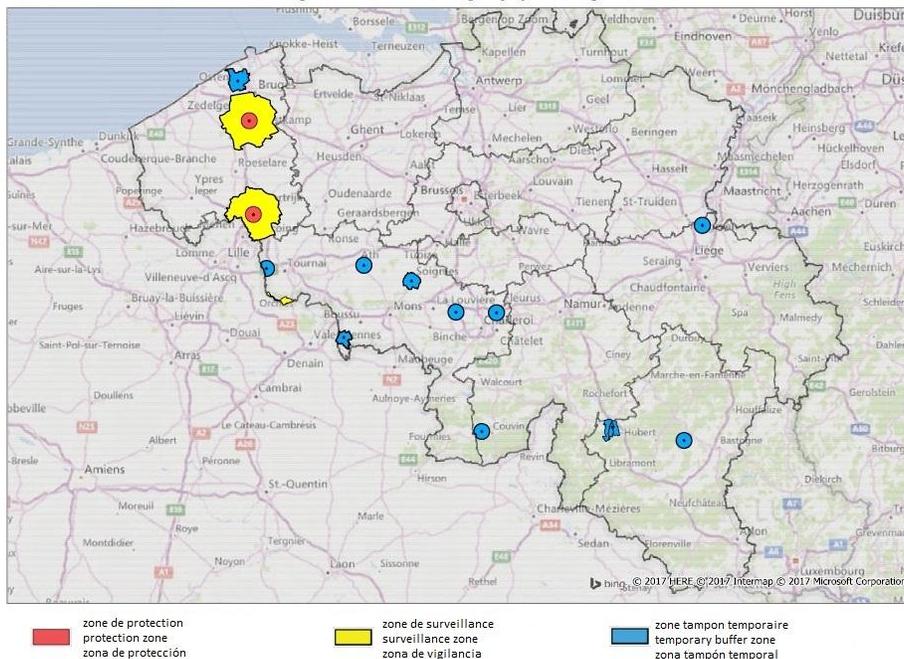


Figure 1 – location of infected farms and restricted areas for the outbreaks notified between 1 June and 7 July 2017 (source : FASFC).



Additional Measures

On June 15, 2017, following the epidemiological link established between some of the outbreaks and the markets where sales of live animals are authorised, several measures were adopted throughout Belgium: ban on the sale of poultry or other birds on the markets, prohibition of poultry or other birds gatherings (competitions, exhibitions ...), basic biosecurity measures to be reinforced.

Since August 15, 2017, new measures have been adopted and published on the website of the FASFC, and are still applicable².

Surveillance Programme and early detection system

For many years Belgium has established a program of passive and active monitoring and surveillance, in wild birds and in domestic poultry farms, in order to remain free from HPAI in poultry. This program is co-financed by the European Commission, and is the subject of two semestrial reports and an annual report³.

The surveillance program complies with Chapter 1.4. and from Articles 10.4.27. at 10.4.33. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code*.

The program includes the following elements:

1. Obligation to declare any clinical suspicion of avian influenza

Veterinarians and owners of poultry and other birds who notice clinical signs that may suspect HPAI infection or a significant daily mortality in a facility should report it immediately to the FASFC Health Authority. All suspected cases of avian influenza are immediately investigated by the FASFC. Samples are taken and sent to the Belgian national reference laboratory CERVA (Center for Veterinary and Agrochemical Studies and Research) for in-depth analyzes.

The mandatory notification of HPAI is mentioned in the Belgian legislation (Royal Decree of 3 February 2014 listing the diseases that are subject to mandatory reporting) and in the European legislation⁴.

2. Vigilance network

A permanent vigilance network is in place. Information on the avian influenza situation in Belgium and in neighbouring countries is regularly transmitted to veterinarians, representatives of the poultry sectors (poultry farmers and ornamental bird breeders), stakeholders such as hunters as well as the public. Updates on the clinical signs specific to active viral avian influenza strains and susceptible species are also provided. Information on the epidemiological situation is communicated to the Delegates of the Member Countries. A free telephone number is available to the public and professionals to report cases of mortality in wildlife (0800 99 777).

² http://www.afsca.be/santeanimale/grippeaviaire/_documents/20170907_mesures_IA_v30_FR_000.pdf

³ National Veterinary Programmes: https://ec.europa.eu/food/funding/animal-health/national-veterinary-programmes_en

⁴ European Directive 82/894/CEE : <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A31982L0894>



3. Biosecurity and sensitive natural areas

In addition to the obligation to declare any suspicion, Belgium has put in place additional containment and biosecurity obligations for commercial farms located in so-called "sensitive natural" zones, that is to say, close to a gathering place for wildlife ⁵.

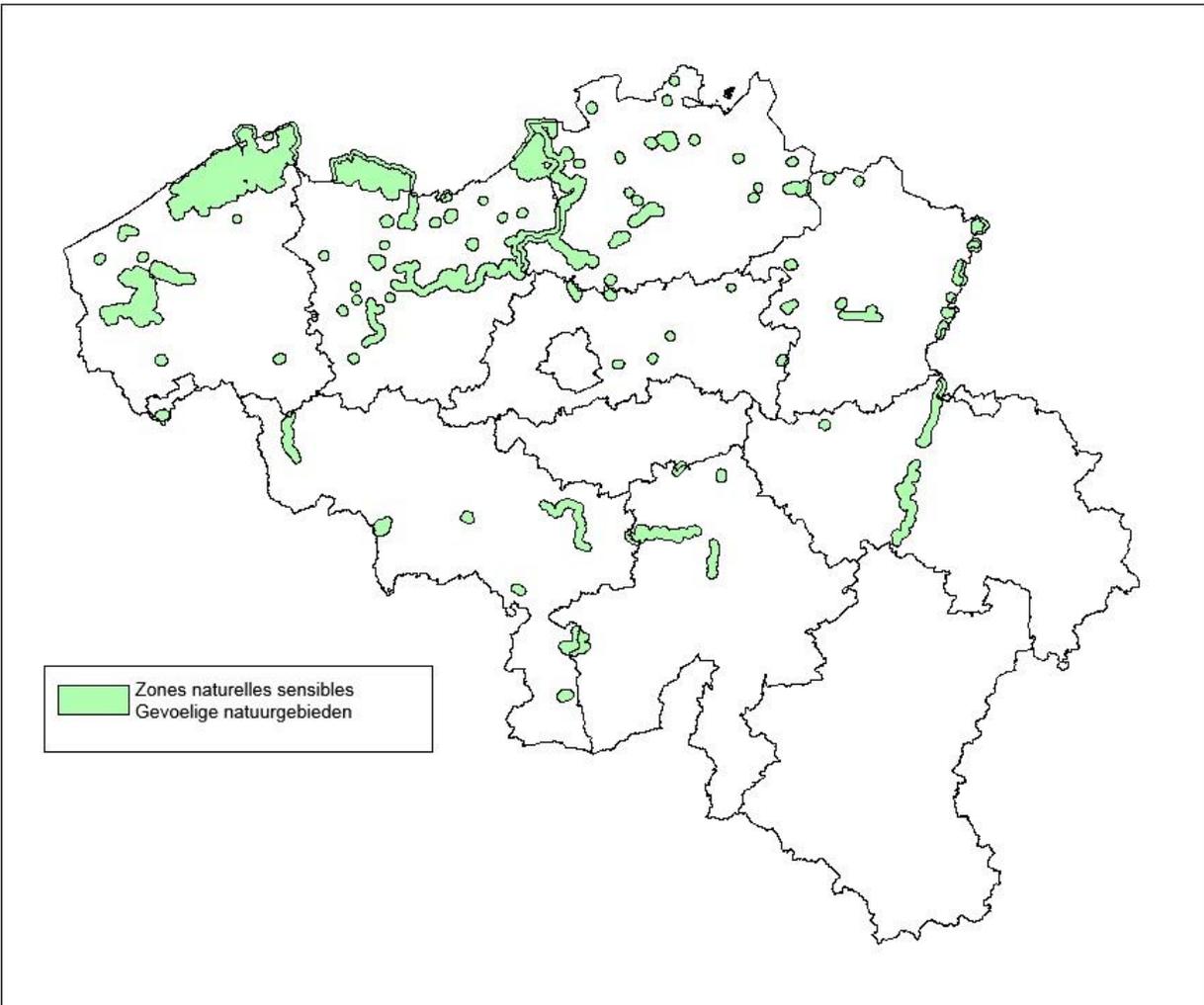


Fig 2: sensitive natural areas in Belgium (source : http://www.afsca.be/pictures/users/adqb/Zones-naturelles-sensibles_20161125.jpg)

4. Serological Surveillance Program co-financed by the European Commission

An active surveillance program in which the susceptible poultry population is subject to regular clinical examinations and active surveillance has been in place in Belgium for many years. Active surveillance is mandatory, in accordance with European legislation (Decision 2010/367 / EU) ⁶. According to the official control program of the FASFC, serum samples are taken from a representative population of Belgian

⁵ Sensitive natural areas in Belgium : <http://www.afsca.be/santeanimale/grippeaviaire/zonesnaturelles/>

⁶ Decision 2010/367/UE : <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32010D0367&qid=1508760992201&from=FR>



professional farms of domestic poultry intended for human consumption (laying hens, breeders, other poultry such as guinea fowl, turkeys, etc. ; at least 10 samples per farm), as well as in all duck and goose farms. For the latter, 20 animals are sampled at each visit, twice a year, with a maximum of 3 months between each blood test. The serological surveillance program is co-financed by the European Commission and is the subject of two reports per year. Approximately 7,500 birds were sampled in 2016, and 3,500 during the first half of 2017.

5. Surveillance of wild birds

Wild birds that are found dead are subject to an event surveillance managed by the Regions (Federated entities, competent for wildlife) in consultation with the FASFC. The Belgian Government has made a free telephone number (088 99777) available to the public to report the discovery of several dead birds in one place. The birds are sent to the CERVA reference laboratory and samples are analyzed to confirm or exclude avian influenza. During the first half of 2017, because of the worrisome European epidemiological situation, 300 wild birds were sampled and analyzed.

Conclusions

The following facts can be highlighted:

1. Before the outbreak of the two poultry flocks in June 2017, Belgium had been free from highly pathogenic avian influenza in poultry for 7 years;
2. Strict control and eradication measures have been adopted, with slaughter of all the birds of a holding and cleaning and disinfection of all affected holdings in accordance with the provisions of the OIE;
3. The surveillance was conducted in accordance with Articles 10.4.27. at 10.4.33. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code*;
4. By September 29, 2017, three months had elapsed since the last cleaning and disinfection of the last infected establishment holding poultry and no other outbreaks occurred in poultry, which, together with the other measures and in application of Article 10.4.4. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code*, allows Belgium to regain its free status.

The Delegate of Belgium to the OIE declares that the country fulfills the conditions required to be considered free from HPAI infection in poultry as of 29 September 2017, in accordance with Article 10.4.4. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* and in accordance with the information provided in the WAHIS system.
