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Self-declaration of recovery of freedom from infection with high pathogenicity avian influenza viruses (HPAI) in poultry by Belgium

Declaration sent to the OIE on 9 July 2021 by Dr Herman Claeys (Federal Public Service for Public Health, Food Chain Safety and the Environment), Delegate of Belgium to the OIE, and Dr Jean-François Heymans (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain), Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) of Belgium and Deputy Delegate of Belgium to the OIE

AVIAN INFLUENZA SITUATION IN BELGIUM – 2020-2021

On 1 November 2020, the 'increased risk period' was declared in Belgium following the detection of the H5N8 subtype of the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus in wild birds in a neighbouring country and additional biosecurity measures were taken to contain the spread of the virus. Despite these measures, HPAI subtype H5N8 was confirmed in Belgium in three wild birds on 13 November 2020 and several outbreaks of avian influenza in poultry and other birds followed.

1. Outbreaks in poultry

On 25 November 2020, the first outbreak of HPAI subtype H5N5 on a poultry farm (broilers) was confirmed in Belgium. This led to the loss of the OIE 'HPAI free' status of Belgium.

On 17 December 2020, an outbreak of low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) type H5 was confirmed in a professional broiler farm.

In 2021, a single outbreak of HPAI subtype H5N8 was confirmed in a poultry farm (broiler turkeys) on 29 January in Deerlijk. Stamping out of all poultry was carried out on the same day.

These 2 outbreaks of HPAI and the outbreak of LPAI in poultry farms were detected through sampling and testing carried out as part of the increased vigilance. In both HPAI outbreaks, there were no specific clinical signs for a highly pathogenic avian influenza virus and only slight mortalities were observed.

Each poultry outbreak has been fully sanitised in accordance with Chapter 7.6. of the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code (*Terrestrial Code*) and the premises have been cleaned and disinfected (on 29 January 2021 for the third poultry farm in Deerlijk).

The measures were progressively lifted in view of the favourable epidemiological situation.

The event was closed on 29 April 2021 with the lifting of the zones around the outbreak in Deerlijk, i.e. three months after the end of the operations in this third and last outbreak holding poultry.

2. Outbreaks in birds other than poultry, including wild birds

On 8 December 2020, Belgium notified a case of HPAI H5N1 in captive birds (amateur chicken holder). The N subtype could not be determined.

In 2021, three outbreaks of HPAI subtype H5N8 were confirmed in captive birds. On 19 April, an outbreak was confirmed in a hobby chicken and duck keeper in Silly. On 22 April, an outbreak was confirmed in Waregem in captive birds held by a trader. And finally, on 10 June, in a captive bird keeper in Le Roeulx.

- The two outbreaks in hobby farmers were confirmed by testing in the context of mortalities.
- The outbreak in the captive bird trader in Waregem was detected following the epidemiological investigation of the hobby keeper in Silly in which HPAI subtype H5N8 had been confirmed three days earlier. The result of the investigation showed that the hobby keeper in Silly had purchased a duck from the captive bird dealer on 30 March 2021. Samples were therefore taken from this trader, whose captive birds present showed no clinical signs.

Regarding cases in wild birds, 17 notifications were sent to the OIE during the months of November and December 2020 and 8 notifications during the months of January to March 2021. These notifications concerned wild birds found dead or moribund.

All these events in poultry and birds other than poultry including wild birds have been reported to the OIE World Animal Health Information System (OIE-WAHIS). An overview of notifications in poultry and non-poultry birds including wild birds can be found in Annex 2.

INTENSIFIED MONITORING AND SURVEILLANCE IN RESPONSE TO OUTBREAKS

1. Measures in outbreaks

Belgium has implemented a strict and structured strategy to stop the spread of the disease, eradicate the virus and sanitise the outbreaks. This control strategy has integrated the control measures mentioned in the European Union Directive 2005/94/EC (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32005L0094>) for outbreaks detected before 21 April 2021. For the outbreak confirmed on 22 April 2021 at the captive bird dealer, in accordance with the new regulation, the measures set out in Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/687 have been applied (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020R0687&qid=1619596242355>). All control measures and inspections were carried out by the FASFC (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain - Belgian Health Authority). These measures include the establishment of restriction zones, the application of strict biosecurity measures and the establishment of a surveillance programme in accordance with the provisions of Articles 10.4.26. to 10.4.30. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

For the outbreaks involving the three **professional poultry keepers** and the outbreak involving the **captive bird dealer**, restriction zones of 3 km radius (protection zone) and 10 km radius (surveillance zone) were established for the HPAI outbreaks, and a restricted zone of 1 km radius was established for the LPAI outbreak. These restriction zones included a ban on the movement of poultry, poultry products (hatching eggs, eggs for consumption, manure, etc.), equipment, vehicles, etc. between poultry farms, the culling of poultry on infected premises, the confinement of poultry kept in these zones, the safe destruction of carcasses and contaminated equipment, the cleaning and disinfection of infected facilities and the application of hygiene measures for personnel, trucks, equipment, etc.

The farms located in a protection zone were visited and clinically investigated by FASFC inspectors. In total, more than 260,000 poultry and captive birds were killed.

For outbreaks involving **hobby keepers** of captive birds that occurred before 21 April 2021, buffer zones were defined around the infected establishment and the birds kept in the outbreaks were killed in accordance with Chapter 7.6. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

A ban on the movement of birds and their products was imposed in these buffer zones. In total, approximately 40 birds were killed in the outbreaks of captive bird keepers.

Thirty days after the stamping out of each HPAI outbreak and 21 days for the LPAI outbreak, as no clinical signs of avian influenza were observed, each area was declared free of the disease and the restriction zones were lifted. Annex 3 provides an overview of the location of the notified outbreaks between 25 November 2020 and 23 June 2021 and the restriction zones that have been delimited.

2. Epidemiological survey

The Health Authority (FASFC) identified the contacts that had occurred between infected flocks and other poultry farms and examined the possible sources of virus introduction. In addition, it carried out a *tracing back and forward* by asking the keepers about all contacts that had occurred during the month preceding the report of the suspicion. In addition, FASFC visited the farms that had supplied products or live animals to check for the presence of the avian influenza virus. An epidemiological link was established between the amateur captive bird keeper in Silly and the captive bird dealer, highlighting the sale of live animals as a source of virus spread.

The source of infection on the trader's farm is likely to be wild birds, as is the case on other affected farms.

After the infection on 10 June 2021 at the captive bird keeper, no further outbreaks have been reported or detected by the surveillance programme.

3. Laboratory analysis

Samples from the outbreaks and contact farms were analysed by the Sciensano National Reference Laboratory. 318 tests were carried out between 25 November 2020 and 23 June 2021 (see details in Annex 4). All the tests carried out at the contact farms were negative, with the exception of the tests carried out at the captive bird trader in Waregem, for which positive laboratory results were obtained.

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

On 1 November 2020, the period of increased risk was determined and additional biosecurity measures were put in place. These measures were reinforced a first time on 15 November 2020 and a second time on 27 November 2020. These measures were the compulsory containment of poultry and other captive birds on professional and hobby farms; the obligation to water and feed poultry and birds indoors; the prohibition of assembly except for markets; and the prohibition of release on broiler farms.

On 6 April 2021, following an improvement in the disease situation, the compulsory confinement of poultry and captive birds in non-professional holdings was lifted.

<https://www.favv-afsca.be/professionnels/productionanimale/santeanimale/grippeaviaire/mesures.asp>

In order to maintain the free status, biosecurity measures and a surveillance programme in domestic and wild birds are maintained as described in the following point.

In addition, strict conditions are imposed on poultry imported into Belgium. A health certificate attested by an official veterinarian is required proving that the poultry meets the requirements of the Royal Decree of 17/06/2013 on animal health conditions governing intra-Community trade and imports from third countries of poultry and hatching eggs and on the conditions for authorisation of poultry establishments. Establishments importing poultry into Belgium must, among other things, be located outside a restricted zone following an outbreak of HPAI and must not be suspected of having HPAI.

MONITORING PROGRAMME AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

Belgium has for many years established a programme of passive and active monitoring and surveillance in wild birds and on domestic poultry holdings to maintain the HPAI-free status of poultry. This programme is co-financed by the European Commission and is the subject of two half-yearly reports and one annual report.

The surveillance programme complies with Chapter 1.4. and Articles 10.4.26. to 10.4.30. of the *Terrestrial Code*.

The programme includes the following elements:

1. Obligation to report any clinical suspicion of avian influenza

Veterinarians and owners of poultry and other birds who observe clinical signs that could lead to the suspicion of an avian influenza infection or a high daily mortality in a facility must immediately report this 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 Sciensano for further analysis.

The compulsory notification of HPAI and LPAI viruses is mentioned in the Belgian (Royal Decree of 3 February 2014 designating the diseases subject to compulsory notification) and European ([EU Regulation 2016/429](#)) legislation.

During the year 2020 until 25 June 2021, 8 suspicions in captive birds (7 in hobby farmers and 1 in a captive bird dealer) and 1 suspicion in a poultry farm (broilers) were notified. These suspicions were all investigated, and samples were sent to the Sciensano national reference laboratory for analysis. All results were negative for avian influenza.

2. Vigilance network

A permanent surveillance network is in place. Information on the avian influenza situation in Belgium and neighbouring countries is regularly provided to veterinarians, representatives of the poultry sector (farmers of poultry and pet birds), stakeholders such as hunters and the general public. Updates on the clinical signs of active avian influenza virus strains and susceptible species are also provided. This information is provided during meetings with the various stakeholders, but also through training courses, newsletters and press releases. Moreover, this information is also available at any time on the [FASFC website](#). These different information channels are also used to raise the awareness of the different actors to maintain their vigilance and to report cases of suspicion. Information on the epidemiological situation is provided to the Delegates of the Member Countries through meetings or targeted communications. A toll-free telephone number is available for the general public and professionals to report cases of mortality in wildlife.

3. Biosafety and sensitive natural areas

In addition to the obligation to report any suspicion, Belgium has introduced additional containment and biosecurity obligations for commercial farms located in so-called "sensitive natural areas", i.e. in the vicinity of a wildlife gathering place (<http://www.afsca.be/santeanimale/grippeaviaire/zonesnaturelles/>). (Map available as Annex 5).

4. Serosurveillance programme co-funded by the European Commission

An active surveillance programme in which the susceptible poultry population is subject to regular clinical examinations and active monitoring has existed in Belgium for many years. The active surveillance is compulsory according to European legislation. According to the official control programme of the FASFC, serum samples are taken from a representative population of Belgian professional poultry farms for human consumption. All holdings with more than 200 birds (ducks, geese, turkeys, guinea fowl, partridges, pheasants, hens and broiler pigeons), with the exception of broiler holdings, as well as the establishments of traders keeping these species are sampled once a year. In holdings located in sensitive areas and in holdings with an outdoor run, as well as in all turkey, duck and goose holdings, a second visit shall be carried out during the year with a maximum interval of 3 months between each blood sample. Ten samples per farm are taken except in dealer establishments and duck and goose farms where 20 samples are taken.

The serological surveillance programme is co-funded by the European Commission and is reported on twice a year. In 2020, 8725 birds were sampled (Details in Annex 6).

5. Wild bird monitoring

Wild birds found dead are subject to event-based surveillance managed by the Regions (federated entities, competent for wildlife) in consultation with the FASFC.

The Belgian government has set up a toll free telephone number for the public to report the discovery of several dead birds in one place. The birds are sent to the Sciensano reference laboratory and samples are analysed to confirm or exclude avian influenza. In 2020, 281 birds found dead were analysed and 20 wild birds were confirmed positive for HPAI (see Table 2 in Annex 2).

Active monitoring is also carried out in wild birds during ringing activities by ornithologists. Cloacal samples are taken from birds and analysed by Sciensano. In 2020, 1,095 birds were sampled. Only one Egyptian goose was positive for HPAI (case number 13 in Table 2 in Annex 2).

Between November 2020 and mid-April 2021, due to the worrying epidemiological situation, 359 wild birds were sampled and analysed.

CONCLUSIONS

The following facts can be highlighted:

1. Prior to the two outbreaks of HPAI in poultry in November 2020 and January 2021 and the outbreak of LPAI in poultry in December 2020, Belgium had been free of HPAI in poultry for 3 years and LPAI for 11 years;
2. Strict control and eradication measures have been adopted, with total culling of birds and cleaning and disinfection of all affected holdings, in accordance with OIE provisions;
3. Surveillance has been carried out in accordance with Articles 10.4.26. to 10.4.30. of the *Terrestrial Code (2021)*;
4. The commodities are imported in accordance with Articles 10.4.7. to 10.4.22;
5. There are ongoing regular awareness programmes in place to report any suspicions of HPAI;
6. As of 29 April 2021, three months have elapsed since the completion of stamping out (i.e. the cleaning and disinfection of the last affected establishment) on 29 January 2021 and no further outbreaks in poultry have occurred, which, together with the other measures and in accordance with Article 10.4.6. of the *Terrestrial Code*, Belgium regains its infection with high pathogenicity avian influenza free status.

The Delegate of Belgium to the OIE declares that the country complies with the requirements to declare freedom from high pathogenicity avian influenza in poultry as of 29 April 2021, in accordance with Chapter 1.6. and Article 10.4.6. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code (2021)* and consistent with the information provided to the OIE - WAHIS system.

Annexe 1 : Déclaration du Délégué de la Belgique auprès de l'OIE

Déclaration devant figurer dans le document d'auto-déclaration.

Je, soussigné, Dr Herman CLAEYS

Délégué (e) de la BELGIQUE auprès de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé animale (OIE), assume la responsabilité de l'auto-déclaration « Indemne d'influenza aviaire hautement pathogène chez les volailles »

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Rédigée le

Signature du/ de la Délégué (e):

Herman Claeys
(Signature)

Digitally signed by Herman Claeys (Signature)
Date: 2021.08.04 22:48:18 +02'00'

Annex 2: Overview of notifications in the OIE World Animal Health Information System (OIE-WAHIS)

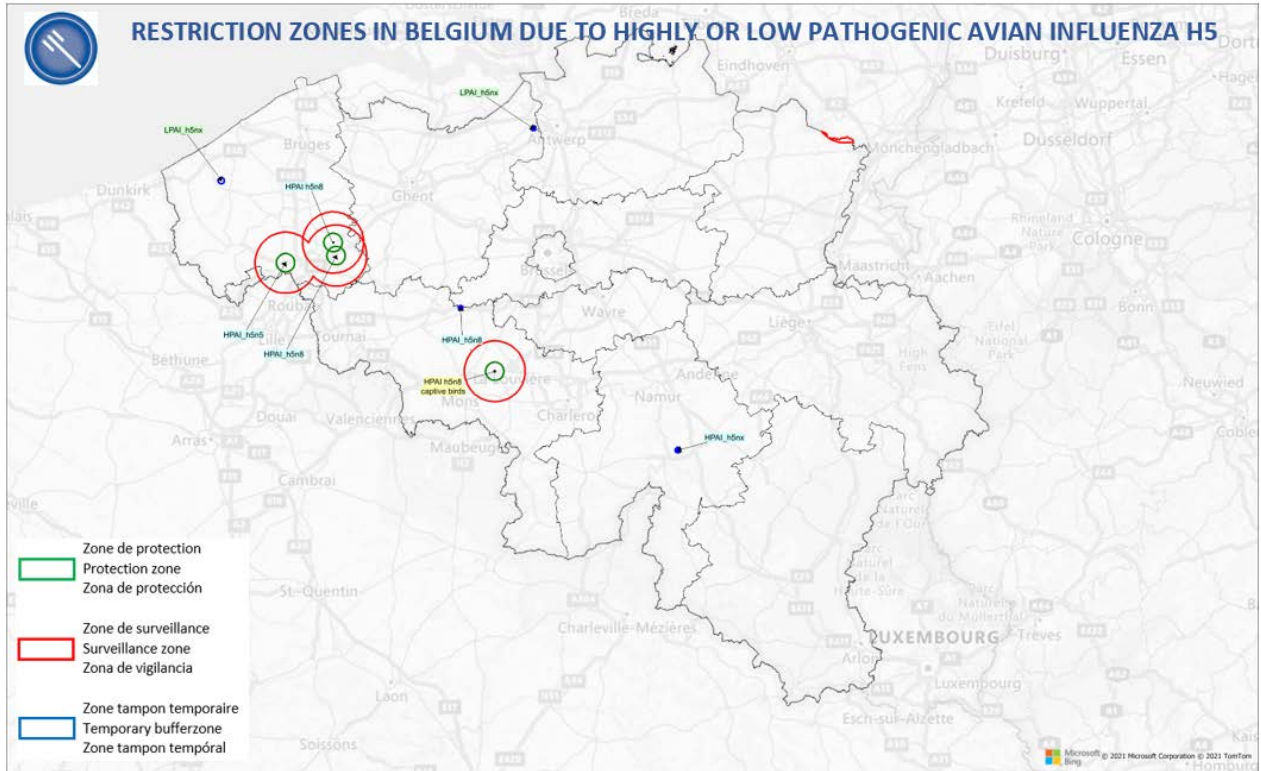
Table 1: List of HPAI and LPAI outbreaks in Belgium, 2020-2021.

Outbreaks	Virus strain	Notification	Province	Type of farm	Number of animals	% Mortality	Measures	Implemented on	Lifted on
Menen	IAHP H5N5	25/11/2020	WVL	Professional broiler farm	151600	0.39	Protection zone: 3 km	26/11/2020	17/12/2020
							Surveillance zone: 10 km	26/11/2020	26/12/2020
Dinant	IAHP H5NX	08/12/2020	NAM	Captive birds (chickens)	8	12.5	Buffer zone: 500 m	08/12/2020	07/01/2021
Diksmuide	IAFP H5NX	17/12/2020	WVL	Professional broiler farm	78900	6.3	Restricted zone: 1 km	17/12/2020	07/01/2021
Deerlijk	IAHP H5N8	29/01/2021	WVL	Professional turkey farm	27230	3.78	Protection zone: 3 km	29/01/2021	19/02/2021
							Surveillance zone: 10 km	29/01/2021	28/02/2021
Silly	IAHP H5N8	19/04/2021	HAI	Captive birds (chickens and ducks)	25	48	Buffer zone: 300 m	16/04/2021	10/05/2021
Waregem	IAHP H5N8	22/04/2021	WVL	Trader of captive birds (ducks, chickens, geese...)	2842	0	Protection zone: 3 km	23/04/2021	14/05/2021
							Surveillance zone: 10 km	23/04/2021	23/05/2021
Le Roeulx	IAHP H5N8	10/06/2021	HAI	Captive birds (chickens)	14	71,4	Buffer zone: 500 m	10/06/2021	30/06/2021
							Protection zone: 3 km	10/06/2021	30/06/2021
							Surveillance zone: 10 km	10/06/2021	Prévu le 09/07/2021

Table 2: List of HPAI cases in wild birds in Belgium, 2020-2021.

Case	Strain	Province	Date of notification to OIE	Date of most recent discovery	Infected birds
1	H5N8	WVL	13/11/2020	13/11/2020	1 Greater white-fronted goose (<i>anser albifrons</i>)
2	H5N8	WVL	13/11/2020	18/11/2020	1 Eurasian curlew (<i>numenius arquata</i>)
3	H5N8	WVL	13/11/2020	18/11/2020	1 European herring gull (<i>larus argentatus</i>)
4	H5N8	WVL	13/11/2020	25/11/2020	5 Mute swan (<i>cygnus olor</i>)
5	H5N8	WVL	13/11/2020	25/11/2020	1 Eurasian collared dove (<i>streptopelia decaocto</i>)
6	H5N8	WVL	13/11/2020	25/11/2020	1 Pink-footed goose (<i>anser brachyrhynchus</i>)
7	H5N8	WVL	18/11/2020	18/11/2020	1 Eurasian curlew (<i>numenius arquata</i>)
8	H5N8	WVL	18/11/2020	18/11/2020	1 Eurasian magpie (<i>pica pica</i>)
9	H5NX	OVL	01/12/2020	01/12/2020	1 Common wood pigeon (<i>columba palumbus</i>)
10	H5N8	OVL	01/12/2020	29/01/2021	1 Canada goose (<i>branta canadensis</i>)
11	H5NX	OVL	01/12/2020	29/01/2021	1 Great crested grebe (<i>podiceps cristatus</i>)
12	H5N8	OVL	01/12/2020	29/01/2021	1 European herring gull (<i>larus argentatus</i>)
13	H5N8	WVL	03/12/2020	03/12/2020	1 Egyptian goose (<i>alopochen aegyptiacus</i>)
14	H5N8	WVL	10/12/2020	10/12/2020	1 Pink-footed goose (<i>anser brachyrhynchus</i>)
15	H5N8	WVL	10/12/2020	23/12/2020	1 Pink-footed goose (<i>anser brachyrhynchus</i>)
16	H5NX	WVL	10/12/2020	23/12/2020	1 Greylag goose (<i>anser anser</i>)
17	H5NX	WVL	23/12/2020	23/12/2020	1 Pink-footed goose (<i>anser brachyrhynchus</i>)
18	H5N8	WVL	06/01/2021	06/01/2021	1 Pink-footed goose (<i>anser brachyrhynchus</i>)
19	H5N8	LIE	14/01/2021	14/01/2021	1 Canada goose (<i>Branta Canadensis</i>)
20	H5N8	LIE	18/02/2021	18/02/2021	25 Common starling (<i>sturnus vulgaris</i>)
21	H5N8	OVL	05/03/2021	05/03/2021	1 Common wood pigeon (<i>columba palumbus</i>)
22	H5N8	LIM	05/03/2021	05/03/2021	1 Barnacle goose (<i>Branta leucopsis</i>)
23	H5N8	OVL	05/03/2021	05/03/2021	1 Eurasian jay (<i>garrulus glandarius</i>)
24	H5N8	ANT	10/03/2021	10/03/2021	1 Grey heron (<i>ardea cinerea</i>)
25	H5NX	WVL	12/03/2021	12/03/2021	3 Eurasian coot (<i>fulica atra</i>)

Annex 3: Location of infected outbreaks and restriction zones for outbreaks notified between 25 November 2020 and 23 June 2021 (source: FASFC).

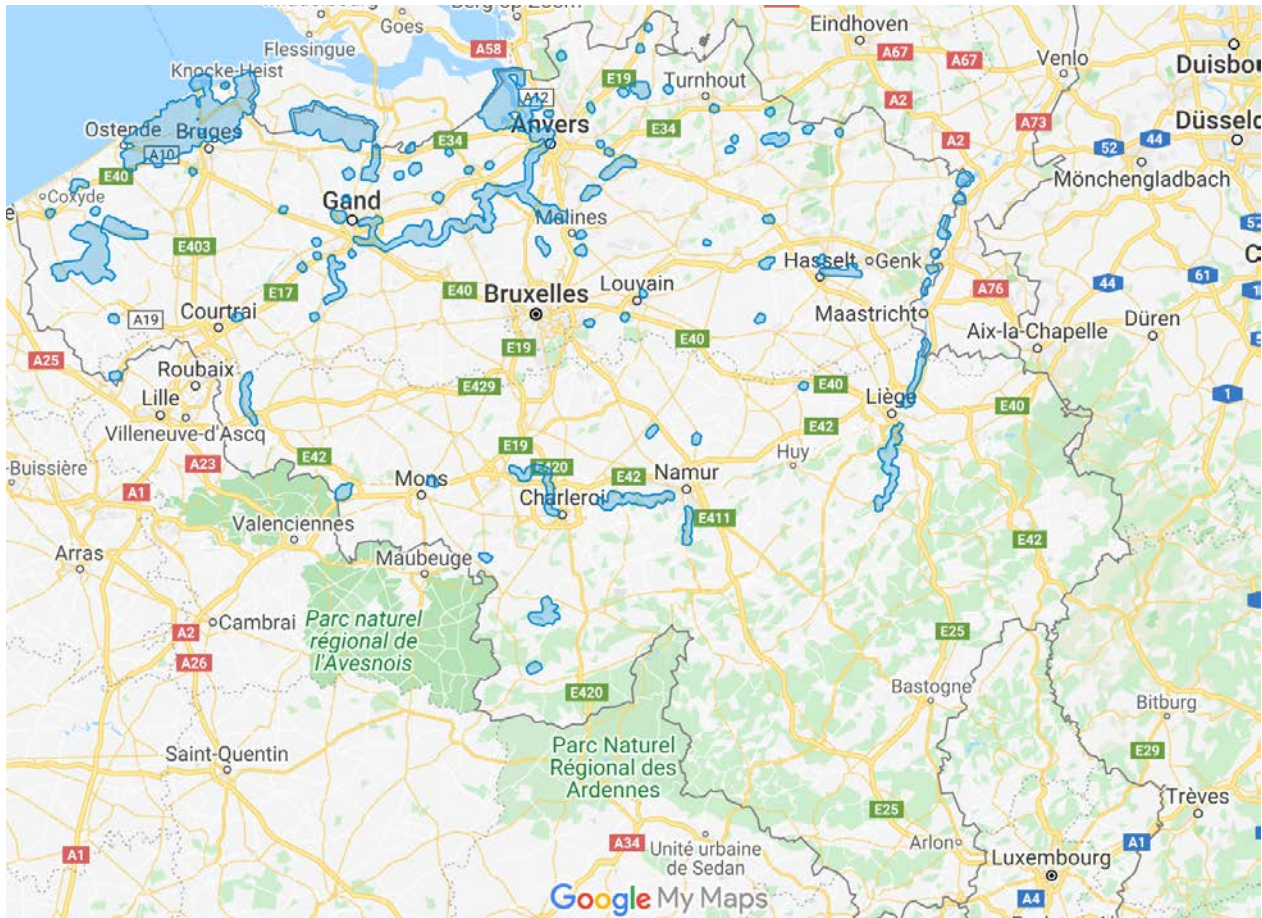


Annex 4: Analysis by Sciensano from 25 November 2020 to 23 June 2021.

TEST DESCRIPTION	TOTAL
<i>Molecular test AFL</i>	100
<i>Molecular test H5</i>	27
<i>Molecular test H5</i>	12
<i>Molecular test Nx</i>	14
<i>Pathotyping AFL</i>	10
<i>Isolation AFL</i>	12
<i>ELISA AFL</i>	110
<i>Inhibition of hemagglutination H5</i>	11
<i>Inhibition of hemagglutination H7</i>	11
<i>Inhibition of hemagglutination AFL for Highly pathogenic H5</i>	11
GRAND TOTAL	318

Annex 5: Sensitive natural areas in Belgium in blue

Source : https://drive.google.com/open?id=1O1jomjN7G-l9eMczv-Sx8ob_xcyaitt&usp=sharing



Annex 6: Serological Monitoring Programme co-funded by the European Commission

Poultry category	Total number of holdings	Total number of holdings sampled	Total number of samples taken
Chicken breeders	205	177	1 770
Fattening Turkeys	38	41	421
Farmed game birds (gallinaceous)	40	26	260
Geese breeders	1	1	80
Fattening ducks	19	17	360
Laying hens	148	175	1 750
Free range laying hens	145	256	2 627
Backyard flocks	162	76	1 527
Total	758	769	8 795

In 2020, 8,725 birds were sampled. In one goose farm, animals tested positive for H5 with the haemagglutinin inhibition test. Further samples from 60 animals from this farm were tested by RT-PCR. All results were negative.