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

Declaration sent to the OIE on 21 January 2022 by Dr Martin Blake, OIE Delegate for Ireland, Chief Veterinary Officer, Veterinary Services, Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine

1. Introduction

The objective of this declaration is to regain disease freedom status from high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) for the entire territory of Ireland from 21 January 2022 in accordance with Article 10.4.6. of Chapter 10.4 Infection with High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza viruses and Article 1.6.3. Procedures for Publication by the OIE of a self-declaration of animal health status by a Member Country, of the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)*.

This declaration describes six outbreaks of HPAI subtype H5N1 in poultry in Ireland, the first of which was confirmed on 20 November 2021, with the last outbreak confirmed on 20 December 2021.

Ireland formally requests the OIE to publish this self-declaration for the recovery of country freedom from high pathogenicity avian influenza. A statement of responsibility for this self-declaration is contained in Annex I

2. Avian influenza situation in Ireland

Ireland's previously self-declared disease freedom was published by OIE on 15 March 2021, in accordance with the provisions of Article 10.4.3. of the *Terrestrial Code* (2019), following a singular outbreak of avian influenza subtype H5N8 in a turkey flock in December 2020. The self-declared disease freedom was maintained until 20 November 2021, when an outbreak of HPAI H5N1¹ was

¹ [OIE WAHIS Report ID 42950](#)

confirmed in a turkey flock following investigation by the competent authority (The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)) into reports of increased mortalities in the flock.

In total, six outbreaks of HPAI H5N1 were confirmed on poultry premises in Ireland between the dates of 20 November 2021 and 20 December 2021. All outbreaks were promptly reported to the OIE via the World Animal Health Information System (OIE-WAHIS). All outbreaks were confirmed by Real-Time Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) and gene sequencing in the DAFM Central Veterinary Research Laboratory, which is Ireland's National Reference Laboratory for avian influenza situated at Backweston Campus, Stacumny Lane, Celbridge, Co. Kildare.

All outbreaks which occurred during 2021 in poultry were confirmed to be HPAI subtype H5N1. There were no confirmed outbreaks of avian influenza in captive birds during this time. A map illustrating the locations and associated restricted zones of the HPAI outbreaks in Ireland in 2021 is provided in Annex II to this document, with details of the individual outbreaks in Table 1 of Annex III.

3. Control and eradication measures in response to avian influenza outbreaks

Avian influenza is a notifiable disease in Ireland as per [Statutory Instrument No. 130 of 2016 \(Notification and Control of Diseases affecting Terrestrial Animals \(No. 2\) Regulations 2016\)](#). A stamping out policy is implemented. Vaccination against avian influenza is not permitted for poultry in Ireland but can be permitted in zoo animals on a voluntary basis, subject to compliance with [Commission Decision 2007/598/EC](#). No birds were vaccinated in 2021 nor in 2022 to date.

Ireland carried out a rapid and effective disease control programme to control the outbreaks and eradicate the virus in accordance with the *Terrestrial Code*, [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/687](#) and national legislation measures. A rapid stamping out policy was implemented on all infected premises, with all carcasses disposed of in a biosecure manner via Category 1 rendering. Cleaning and disinfection procedures of premises, vehicles, equipment and any other objects which may have been directly or indirectly contaminated were carried out in order to destroy avian influenza virus in accordance with the *Terrestrial Code* and [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/687](#). Any materials which could not be appropriately cleaned and disinfected were destroyed. The cleaning and disinfection of the last infected premises was completed on 23 December 2021.

Following the confirmation of each outbreak of HPAI in poultry, a Protection Zone (PZ) with a minimum radius of 3km, and a Surveillance Zone (SZ) with a minimum radius of 10km were established around the infected premises. Disease control measures consistent with the *Terrestrial Code* and [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/687](#) were implemented within the restriction zones including movement restrictions, a system of licencing authorised movements subject to conditions and specified biosecurity measures in relation to the movements of poultry, poultry products including live birds, hatching eggs, and equipment or materials likely to transmit virus to, from or within the zones. Personnel, vehicles and equipment entering or leaving poultry or captive bird premises within restricted zones were required to observe appropriate biosecurity measures as laid down by DAFM in order to mitigate against the risk of spreading avian influenza virus.

In addition to the restricted zones (PZs & SZs), imposed around the six outbreaks in Ireland (IE) a further PZ and SZ resulting from an outbreak in the Aghnacloy area of Northern Ireland (NI) traversed territories of both NI and IE. Veterinary services in DAFM liaised closely with NI colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) to coordinate the placement and subsequent removal of zones. Close communication between the two authorities ensured that all required surveillance was completed prior to simultaneous removal of the restricted zones which spanned both jurisdictions.

A census of all poultry establishments, including backyard flocks situated within the restricted zones were carried out by DAFM officials. Following establishment of the restriction zones, flock owners

were contacted by DAFM to inform them of restrictions that applied, enquire as to the health status of the flock, collect epidemiological information, and advise them to contact the DAFM Regional Veterinary Office if they had any concerns regarding the health of their poultry or avian influenza. All poultry premises within the PZ were visited by a DAFM official veterinarian where a clinical examination on the poultry was conducted. Based on risk assessment, a proportion of flocks within the SZ were visited. Subsequently all commercial flocks within a PZ, and a proportion of flocks within the SZ were sampled for laboratory analysis. No evidence of HPAI was identified during the clinical examinations or laboratory testing.

Extensive epidemiological investigations at each infected premises were conducted, for the purpose of identifying possible sources and spread of infection through personnel contacts, vehicles, equipment, poultry, poultry products and equipment. No further outbreaks were identified through epidemiological investigations. It was concluded that the most likely route of introduction of virus into infected premises was via direct or indirect contact with wild birds due to the known presence of HPAI H5N1 in wild birds in the area leading to high infection pressure.

In light of increased risk of an avian influenza outbreak in Ireland following the detection of HPAI H5N1 in wild birds last November, additional national legislation was introduced to help mitigate risk of spread into poultry and captive bird populations.

On 17 November 2021, DAFM introduced [Avian Influenza \(Biosecurity Measures\) Regulations 2021](#) for poultry and captive bird owners and [Avian Influenza \(Restriction on Assembly of Live Birds\) Regulations 2021](#) which introduced a ban on bird gatherings for fairs, shows, and sales. The biosecurity regulations require all poultry owners to implement additional biosecurity measures on their holdings including for example, restricting access to poultry to essential visitors, establishing disinfection points and storing feed and bedding in a manner to prevent wild bird access.

In addition, a confinement order was introduced on 22 November 2021 [Avian Influenza \(Precautionary Confinement of Birds\) Regulations 2021](#) requiring all poultry and other captive birds to be housed or confined in a manner which prevents access by wild birds. Regular disease updates and biosecurity advice are emailed to poultry industry stakeholders, competent authority veterinarians and are posted online at www.gov.ie/birdflu. In addition to the legislative powers which DAFM used to mitigate the risk, DAFM also held regular update meetings with key industry stakeholders to address their queries and to emphasise the importance of high biosecurity standards. This stakeholder engagement helped ensure industry cooperation and clarity in relation to the disease control measures in place.

Due to the fact that the higher risk period for avian influenza (November-April) continues, the national legislation outlined above will remain in force until risk assessment considers that removal is appropriate.

4. Surveillance programme and early detection system

Ireland carries out an extensive surveillance programme to rapidly detect early incursions of disease and to demonstrate freedom from infection with HPAI and LPAI subtypes H5/H7. The programme includes both active and passive elements in accordance with both Chapter 1.4. and Articles 10.4.26. to 10.4.30. of the *Terrestrial Code* and Annex II of [Commission Delegated Regulation\(EU\) 2020/689](#). The national strategy in relation to AI surveillance is to prevent establishment of disease by monitoring for the presence and early detection of the virus, through active and passive surveillance of domestic poultry and wild birds.

4.1. Passive surveillance in poultry

Avian influenza is a notifiable disease in Ireland in accordance with national legislation [Statutory Instrument No. 130 of 2016 \(Notification and Control of Diseases affecting Terrestrial Animals \(No. 2\) Regulations 2016\)](#) meaning that anyone who suspects the disease is legally obliged to notify DAFM without delay. This forms part of Ireland's early warning system. In the event of a suspicion of avian influenza in poultry, the requirements of Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/687 as regards rules for the prevention and control of certain listed diseases are implemented in line with DAFM's specific written procedures. In summary, a DAFM official veterinarian (OV) visits the suspect establishment and carries out a clinical examination of the suspect animal or animals based on a specific protocol. Where disease cannot be ruled out on clinical grounds, samples are taken from the suspect animal or animals and from in contact animals or a representative sample of animals on the establishment based and submitted for analysis. While awaiting the results of the laboratory tests the suspect establishment is placed under official restriction so that movement of susceptible animals, animal products and by-products are prohibited.

In addition, any poultry that die on farm but where avian influenza is not suspected can be submitted for general post-mortem to the country's network of Regional Veterinary Laboratories where they will be screened for avian influenza as part of a general diagnostic panel. This forms another element of Ireland's Early Warning System for avian influenza.

4.2. Active surveillance in poultry

a) Avian influenza H5 and H7 serology testing of poultry under the EU Poultry Surveillance Scheme.

Ireland's avian influenza surveillance programme is based on representative sampling, which takes into account criteria in Annex II of Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/689 at a level reflective of Annex I of Commission Decision 2010/367/EU. Sampling and serological testing are carried out for the purpose of detecting the presence of antibodies to avian influenza. Sampling is stratified throughout Ireland so that it is representative of the whole country. On farm and slaughter plant sampling is carried out for different categories below and coincides with seasonal production for certain categories e.g., fattening turkeys. Up to 2018 the results were reported to the European Commission, and from 2019 onwards results are submitted to the European Food Safety Authority. The categories sampled for the EU Poultry Surveillance Scheme include:

Laying Hens (caged)¹
Free Range Laying Hens²
Chicken breeders
Turkey Breeders
Duck Breeders
Geese Breeders
Fattening Turkeys
Fattening Ducks
Fattening Geese
Broilers (kept in free range production)

¹Includes caged and barn

²Includes free-range and organic

b) Avian influenza serology testing in poultry for the national Poultry Health Programme (PHP)

The Poultry Health Programme is a DAFM surveillance programme to support safe trade in poultry, and to comply with [Regulation \(EU\) 2016/429](#) (Animal Health Law) and [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/688](#)

The PHP also includes testing for Mycoplasma and Salmonella. 1148 samples were tested for avian influenza within the programme from 1st January to 31 December 2021 and a further 241 samples were tested between 1 January and 19 January 2022 using the Agar Gel Immunodiffusion test (AGID). All of these AGID tests returned a negative result. In the event that an AGID tests positive, an ELISA test would be applied. If this ELISA test is positive, then H5 and H7 Haemagglutinin Inhibition (HAI) tests are applied. In parallel if ELISA confirms the AGID results an official investigation into the flock is carried out by DAFM and further sampling and testing would occur.

All positive avian influenza PCR detections go forward for virus isolation, enabled by a continuous access to embryonated eggs provided by our institute farm. When an avian influenza virus is isolated, material is then transferred to the EU Reference Laboratory and the national reference laboratory engages with them on the subsequent sequencing process.

4.2. Wild bird monitoring

DAFM has an early warning system in place for reporting of unusual mortalities in wild birds with Birdwatch Ireland, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), and the National Association of Regional Game Councils (NARGC). This early warning system ensures DAFM is informed if there is any increase in numbers of dead wild birds or large wild bird die offs in the country. DAFM also implements training programmes for staff at NPWS in conjunction with medical doctors, on avian influenza which includes various occupational health measures such as seasonal flu vaccination and training on how to use appropriate personal protective equipment should they be involved in an outbreak of AI in the wild bird population. Members of the public are encouraged to report any moribund or dead wild birds and can contact a dedicated Avian Influenza hotline phone number or use the [Avian Check App](#) to report sick or dead wild birds. DAFM also has a dedicated avian influenza webpage at www.gov.ie/birdflu which provides a wide range of information, advice and publications on AI for poultry industry stakeholders and other interested groups. Any birds to be tested are collected by trained DAFM personnel and submitted to the DAFM Regional Veterinary Laboratories (RVL) for sampling. Samples are then submitted to the DAFM Central Veterinary Research Laboratory (CVRL) where Avian Influenza testing is carried out.

The list of species of wild birds to be targeted for surveillance for avian influenza is available on the website of the [EURL for Avian Influenza](#) in accordance with the scientific opinion provided by European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) which is adapted in Ireland by ornithologists regarding wild bird species found in Ireland and is updated regularly.

In the event of a confirmed case of avian influenza as defined in Annex I of Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/689 in a wild bird, notification will be made to the Animal Disease Information System (ADIS) by the National Disease Control Centre (NDCC) within 24 hours of confirmation. An immediate notification will also be submitted by the NDCC to the OIE within 24 hours of the first case of an avian influenza subtype in the country and follow up reports submitted for all subsequent similar cases in accordance with Chapter 1.1 of the *Terrestrial Code*.

The first wild bird with HPAI H5N1 in Ireland in 2021 was confirmed on 3 November 2021. The total number of wild birds confirmed with Avian Influenza in 2021 can be found in the table below:

Number of wild birds tested for Avian influenza in Ireland*

Year	Total tested- AI M gene PCR	Positives- AI M gene PCR	Positives- H5 gene PCR N8 gene PCR	Positives- H5 gene PCR N3 gene PCR	Positives- H5 gene PCR N1 gene PCR	Pathogenicity by cleavage site sequencing	Virus Isolation in SPF eggs**
2021	307	71 (51 events)	5 x H5N8 (4 events)	2 x H5N3 (same event)	64 x H5N1 (46 events)	65 x HPAI 6 x undetermined	1 x H5N3 1 x H5N1
2022	4	2	None	None	2 x H5N1	2x HPAI	

*Table represents the number of wild birds tested for AI. The number of actual PCR tests carried out is much higher.

** Virus isolation was carried out on initial HPAI confirmed subtype cases in wild birds

Numbers of wild birds tested for Avian Influenza in 2021 and up to 14.01.2022

5. Measures implemented to maintain freedom

Both European Union (EU) legislation and national legislation are enforced in addition to strategies for effective risk management, risk communication to stakeholders, and enhanced on-farm biosecurity to safeguard the Irish poultry industry from the risk posed by notifiable avian influenza. Imports of poultry and poultry products into Ireland are carried out in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 10.4.7. to 10.4.22 on infection with High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza Viruses of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)*. All imports of poultry, poultry products and hatching eggs are subject to veterinary certification in accordance with the provisions of EU legislation, including [Regulation \(EU\) 2016/429](#) (Animal Health Law) and [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/688](#)

The control measures for high pathogenicity avian influenza are laid down in EU legislation [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/687](#) and in national legislation including [Statutory Instrument No. 15 of 2013 \(Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013\)](#). The registration of all poultry holdings in Ireland with DAFM is a national legislative requirement in accordance with [Statutory Instrument No. 114/2014 - Control on places where poultry are kept Regulations 2014](#). The requirement to register applies to all poultry premises, from large commercial poultry holdings to premises with only 1 or 2 birds such as hobby or “backyard” poultry flocks.

[Statutory Instrument No. 130 of 2016 \(Notification and Control of Diseases affecting Terrestrial Animals \(No. 2\) Regulations 2016\)](#) categorises avian influenza as a high priority notifiable disease. This means that any person who suspects the presence of the disease is legally obliged to report it to DAFM without delay. DAFM operates a 24/7 on-call rota involving veterinary staff for the notification and investigation of all suspect former OIE List A diseases including avian influenza.

DAFM has implemented a comprehensive biosecurity awareness programme for avian influenza which involves the publication of regular disease updates to a wide range of stakeholders which can be accessed on the dedicated www.gov.ie/birdflu page. During high-risk periods in particular, DAFM also hold regular meetings with poultry stakeholders to heighten awareness of the importance of biosecurity. Avian influenza clinical signs factsheets and tailored biosecurity leaflets have been produced for different categories of production including for example backyard flocks, turkey flocks etc. DAFM also operates a text alert service to communicate quickly with registered flock owners during a high-risk period. Online social media platforms and advertising sites for poultry are used to communicate with poultry and captive bird owners to raise awareness of the risk and mitigating measures that they can take to prevent avian influenza.

6. Conclusion

Considering that:

- High pathogenicity avian influenza is a notifiable disease in Ireland
- Prior to the outbreaks which occurred during the period of 20 November 2021 to 20 December 2021, Ireland has been free from avian influenza viruses in poultry (self-declaration published on 15 March 2021)
- A stamping out policy, cleaning and disinfection has been applied to all infected premises following confirmation of the virus in poultry. The final date of cleaning and disinfection was certified on 23 December 2021
- 28 days have since lapsed from the certified date of cleaning and disinfection at the most recent confirmed infected premises as prescribed in Article 10.4.6. of the *Terrestrial Code*
- Surveillance has been carried out in accordance with Articles 10.4.26. to 10.4.30. of the *Terrestrial Code*
- A continual awareness programme in relation to avian influenza is in place, and
- Commodities are imported in accordance with Articles 10.4.7. to 10.4.22. of the *Terrestrial Code*

The Delegate of Ireland to the OIE declares that the country complies with the requirements for a country free from infection with high pathogenicity avian influenza viruses (HPAI) in poultry as of 21 January 2022, 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.

Annex I

Statement to be included in the self-declaration document.

I, the undersigned, Dr Martin Blake, Delegate of Ireland to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), take responsibility for the self-declaration of freedom from highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in accordance with the provisions of Article 10.4.6 of the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code.

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Drawn up on 21 January 2022

Signature of the Delegate:

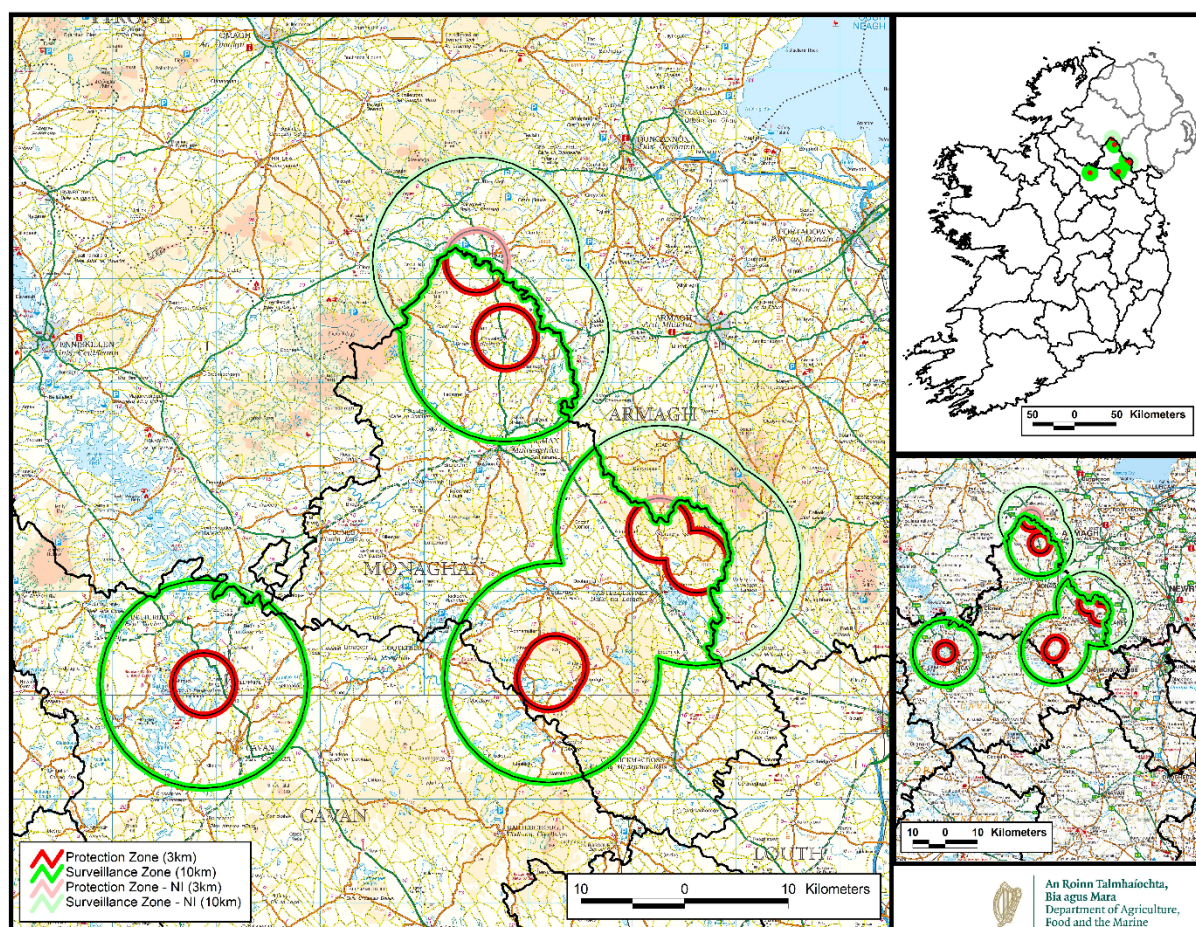


Dr. Martin Blake

Chief Veterinary Officer -Ireland

Annex II

Map 1: Location of all Protection Zones (red outline) and Surveillance Zones (green outline) imposed following HPAI outbreaks in Ireland in 2021



Annex III

Table 1: Summary of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza outbreaks in Ireland in 2021

Outbreak number	OIE WAHIS event ID	OIE WAHIS outbreak number	HPAI confirmation date	Subtype	Location	Premises type	Cleansing and disinfection approval date
AVI-2021-001	evt_4086	ob_92741	20/11/2021	H5N1	Castleblayney, Co Monaghan	Fattening turkeys	07/12/2021
AVI-2021-002	evt_4086	ob_92976	24/11/2021	H5N1	Latton, Castleblayney, Co Monaghan	Broiler breeders	09/12/2021
AVI-2021-003	evt_4086	ob_93375	01/12/2021	H5N1	Castleblayney, Co Monaghan	Caged laying hens	17/12/2021
AVI-2021-004	evt_4086	ob_93708	08/12/2021	H5N1	Butlersbridge, Co Cavan	Fattening turkeys	17/12/2021
AVI-2021-005	evt_4086	ob_94108	14/12/2021	H5N1	Castleblayney, Co Monaghan	Fattening ducks	17/12/2021
AVI-2021-006	evt_4086	ob_94434	20/12/2021	H5N1	Emyvale, Co Monaghan	Breeder and fattening ducks	23/12/2021