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Self-declaration of freedom from highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) by Italy

Declaration submitted to the OIE on 17 July 2019 by Dr Silvio Borrello, OIE Delegate for Italy, Directorate General for Animal Health and Veterinary Medicinal Products, Ministry of Health

1. Situation of highly pathogenic avian influenza

Three outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N8) occurred in Italy in 2018: the last on 12 March 2018. All these outbreaks were reported to OIE World Animal Health Information System (WAHIS). Infected flocks were culled, and the establishments were cleaned and disinfected. Measures were gradually lifted, according to the epidemiological situation. All three outbreaks were closed, the last on 23 March 2018.

1.1 Control and intensified surveillance to obtain freedom from AI

Italy has carried out a control program and intensified surveillance to obtain its freedom from AI in poultry and an effective early detection system is in place. The programmes are carried out under the responsibility of the official Veterinary Services.

1.2 Control and intensified surveillance in response to outbreaks

Strategic actions to eradicate the disease and to control the three outbreaks were carried out by the official Veterinary Services, and included all the measures provided by Directive [2005/94/EC](#)¹ as well as others taken by the Italian authorities.

Restriction areas of 3 and 10 km radius were established in which certain measures were applied. These measures included culling of poultry on infected premises, movement restrictions between poultry farms, safe destruction of carcasses and contaminated material, cleaning and disinfection of the infected premises and the application of hygienic measures for personnel, trucks, materials etc. Poultry were killed in compliance with Chapter 7.6 of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)* and safely disposed of.

After the confirmation of HPAI and the culling of all poultry flocks on the infected premises, all poultry flocks (19) in a 3 km zone around each outbreak were clinically examined and animals were sampled and tested for

¹ Directive 2005/94/EC: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02005L0094-20190101&rid=1>

exclusion of the presence of AI virus. 20 samples per barn in each holding were generally collected and tested (Table 1). None of the samples tested positive, meaning that no flock within the 3 km zone was infected.

Table 1. Total number of samples tested within the 3 km zone surrounding the two HPAI outbreaks in the Bergamo province (Lombardy): municipality of Martinengo - Start date 02/03/2018 – End date 07/03/2018 and municipality of Cologno al Serio - Start date 12/03/2018 – End date 23/03/2018

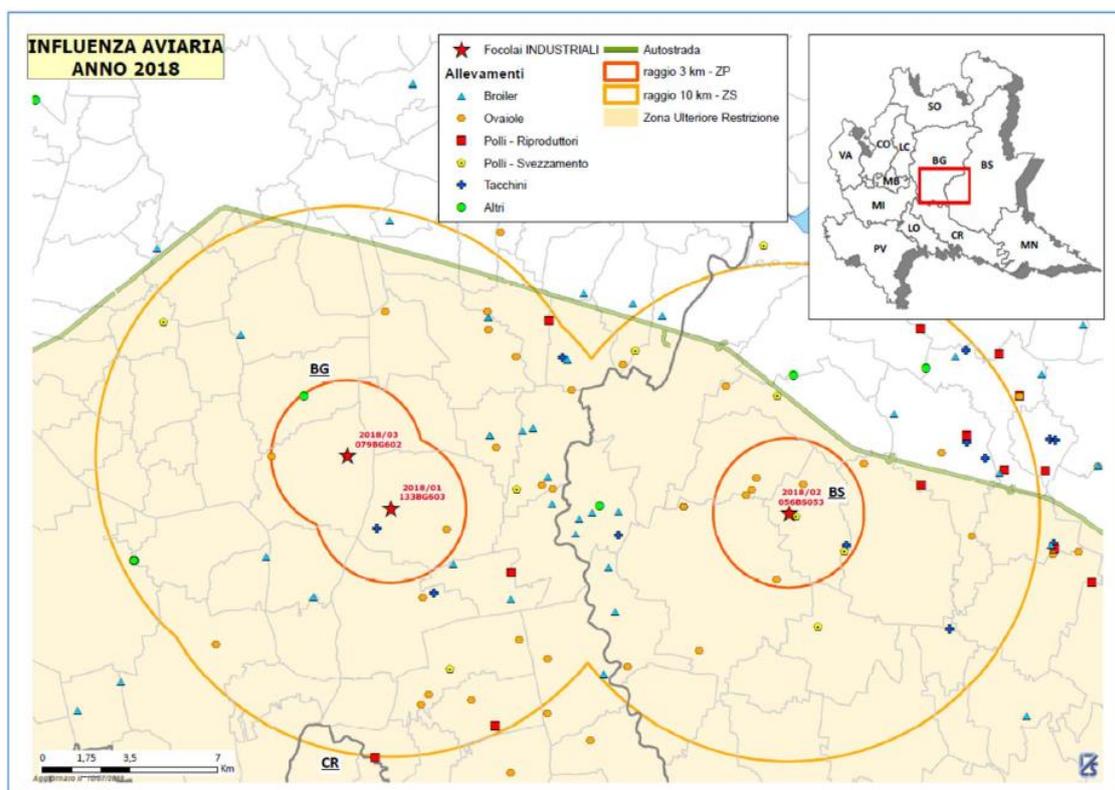
Test	March 2018		April 2018		May 2018		Total	
	Sample	Pool	Sample	Pool	Sample	Pool	Sample	Pool
Type A Influenza virus (AIV) RT-PCR	1050	147	806	75	55	6	1911	228
Subtype H7 AIV RT-PCR	0	15	0	0	0	0	0	15
Subtype H5 AIV RT-PCR	0	15	0	0	0	0	0	15

Note: the protection zones of the two outbreaks in the Bergamo province were jointly reported because of a partial overlap of the two protection zones.

Table 2: Total number of samples tested within the 3 km zone surrounding the outbreak in the Brescia province (Lombardy): municipality of Coccaglio - Start date 08/03/2018 – End date 11/03/2018

Test	March 2018		April 2018		May 2018		Total	
	Sample	Pool	Sample	Pool	Sample	Pool	Sample	Pool
Type A Influenza virus (AIV) RT-PCR	220	39	183	12	0	0	403	51

Figure 1. Map of outbreaks in 2018 with restriction zones



Over a period of 21 days following the depopulation measures for each outbreak, the flocks in the 10 km zones were visited, the poultry clinically examined and samples collected.

This surveillance programme concluded no additional outbreaks of the disease.

The samples were analyzed by the territorially competent laboratories at the Istituto Zooprofilattico of Lombardia and Emilia Romagna (IZLER) belonging to the network of official diagnostic laboratories whose work is supervised by the National Reference Centre and OIE Reference Laboratory for avian influenza (Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie - IZSve) through annual proficiency tests.

After the outbreak dated 12 March 2018, no further outbreaks were reported or detected by surveillance.

2. Surveillance programme and early detection system

Italy has a detailed surveillance programme carried out annually to quickly detect new viral incursions and to demonstrate the freedom from avian influenza. The official veterinary authorities carry out all control measures and inspections. This control strategy includes measures reported in Directive [2005/94/EC](#) of the European Union, and extra measures taken by the Italian authorities.

The programme contains elements, such as:

2.1 Obligation to report a clinical suspicion of avian influenza

Avian influenza is notifiable in the whole country. Veterinarians (private veterinarians included) and poultry holders/owners should immediately report any clinical signs that may indicate infection with HPAI and low pathogenic avian influenza viruses (increased mortality and/or deviations in zootechnical parameters) to the official veterinary services. All suspected cases of avian influenza are immediately investigated by the official veterinary services. Samples are collected and sent to the territorially competent official laboratories for examination. Positive and doubtful samples are sent to the National Reference laboratory and OIE Reference Laboratory for avian influenza (IZSve) for confirmatory testing, performed in compliance with the OIE *Manual of Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines for Terrestrial Animals*.

2.2 Awareness programme

An ongoing awareness programme is enforced. If deemed necessary, the veterinary services and the representatives of poultry sector are informed about the avian influenza situation in Italy and its neighbouring countries. The information includes the report of clinical signs of circulating avian influenza virus strains and susceptible species. Information is shared between Delegates of affected and non-affected EU member States, and Delegates of non-EU countries importing poultry and products thereof from Italy.

2.3 Serological monitoring

An active surveillance programme in which the susceptible poultry population undergoes regular clinical examination and active surveillance is implemented. There is a thorough serological monitoring system, mandatory in the EU (Decision 2010/367/EU²). The criteria used to define the three risk levels were the species at major risk and the number of outbreaks detected in industrial farms during the last five years. In particular free-range farms located in wintering areas of mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) are considered at risk of introduction. Considering these criteria, the territory was divided in areas with high (more frequent sampling) and medium risk (less frequent sampling) (Figure 2.). In low risk areas, surveillance activities are performed when any suspicion of the disease and an outbreak is reported i.e. passive surveillance and through regular sampling of rural flocks i.e. active surveillance (in areas with flocks in brooding phase).

The surveillance strategy was defined based on risk, taking into consideration the following factors:

- location of poultry farm in areas of high density of migratory birds.
- presence of areas with a high density of poultry farms.
- structural and management characteristics of the poultry production system.

² Decision 2010/367/EU: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32010D0367&from=EN>

- current and historical epidemiological situation (risk factors for introduction and diffusion detected during previous epidemics).
- flow of commercial exchanges. and
- biosecurity measures of commercial farms of endangered species.

In the areas identified as being at high risk (regions of Emilia Romagna, Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto), the following species belonging to industrial farms will be sampled with a frequency as shown below:

- Meat turkeys: serological sampling from 5 animals per production unit with a minimum number of 10 animals per farm up to a maximum of 20, per production cycle (preferably before loading to the slaughterhouse for both males and females);
- Breeding quails: virological sampling in breeding at least 20 animals every six months;
- Ducks and geese for fattening and breeding: semi-annual sampling for virological examination (cloacal swabs on individual subjects and / or fresh stool pool) from 5 animals per production unit with a minimum number of 10 animals per farm up to a maximum of 20. In the case of companies with a single warehouse, the number of samples is 10;
- Breeding farms (except those of ducks and geese and quails) and laying hens for the production of eggs for consumption (including free range farms): taking blood samples from 5 animals per production unit with a minimum number of 10 animals per farm up to a maximum of 20 on a half-yearly basis, possibly before handling towards laying herds for pullets and before loading them at the slaughterhouse;
- Other poultry (excluding broilers and quails): serological sampling of at least 10 animals per breeding once / year;
- Game: collection of 5 blood samples per aviary every six months (10 if the breeding consists of a single aviary) up to a maximum of 20 samples per farm.
- Ratites: serological sampling of at least 5 animals per breeding once / year.

In the areas classified as medium risk of introduction and diffusion of avian influenza viruses (Umbria region, provinces of Udine and Pordenone for Friuli-Venezia-Giulia and the province of Viterbo for Lazio) the following species will be sampled:

- turkeys for fattening and reproducers, breeding chickens;
- laying hens both reared indoors and free-range;
- breeding game;
- fattening geese and ducks and reproducers.
- In breeding ducks and geese for breeding or meat, a sample will be taken every six months for virological examination (cloacal swabs on individual subjects and / or fresh stool pools), from 5 animals per production unit with a minimum number of 10 animals per company up to a maximum of 20. In the case of companies with a single warehouse, the number of samples is 10.

In the regions exposed to high and medium risk, the backyard rural farms that will be sampled every six months (in spring and autumn in conjunction with the migratory phases) will have to be identified. The numbers and types of animals to be sampled will be defined based on the species bred and the types of production. In each farm at least 10 birds will be subjected to a virological investigation. The number of farms to be sampled at national level (in particular in the regions included in this surveillance plan) is 250 in total.

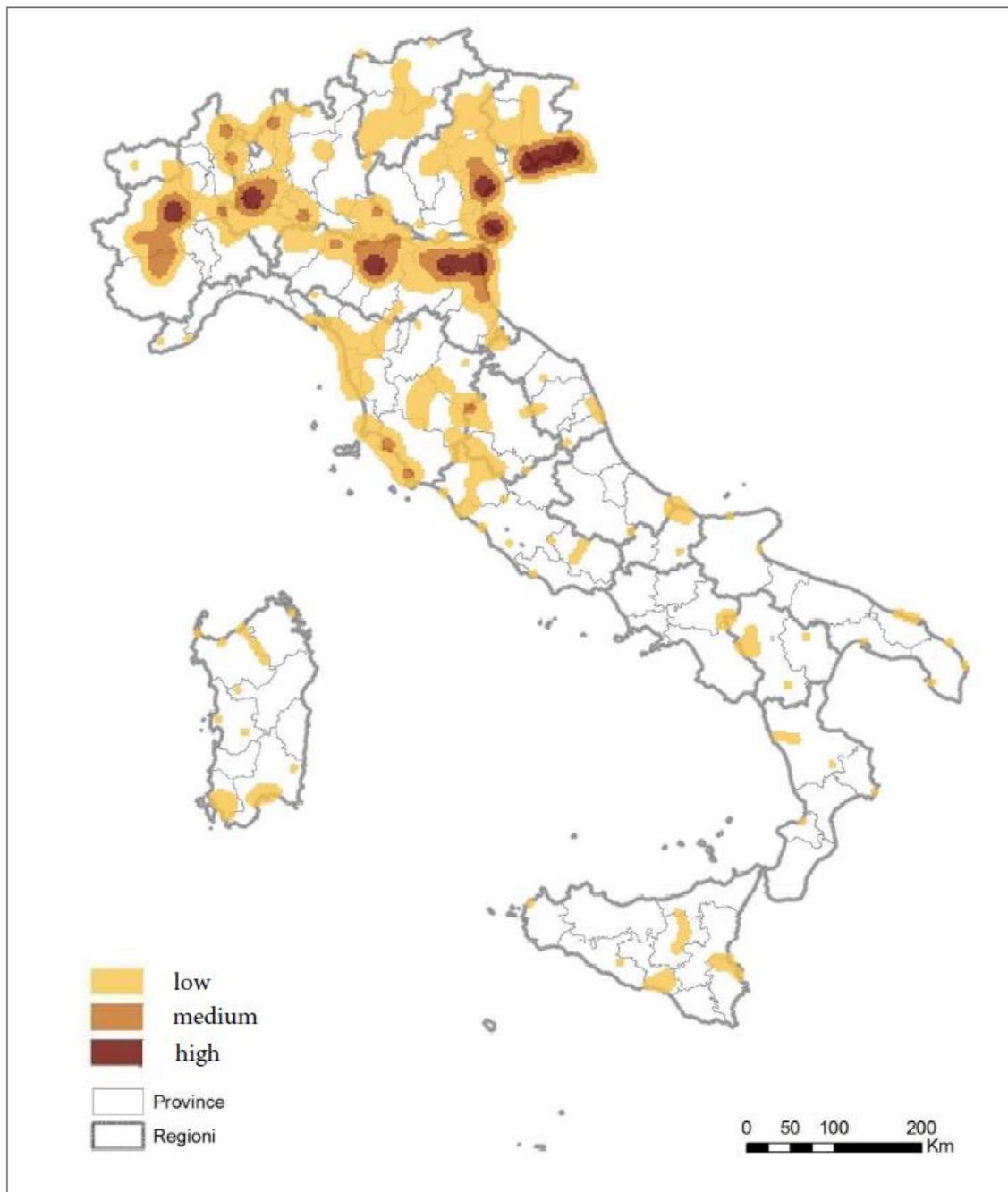
In industrial farms located in areas posing a major risk, sampling generally has been done with a six-month frequency. Only turkeys intended to be slaughtered for meat production and ratites are sampled for productive cycle.

In industrial farms located in areas posing a medium risk, sampling is performed once per year.

In rural farms located in areas posing a major or medium risk, the sampling has a six-month frequency (spring and autumn) according to the birds' migration.

The monitoring activity, carried out at national level, allowed the identification of positive avian influenza strains of the low pathogenic H7N3 subtype in 2007 and 2009-2010. These epidemics have mainly involved the rural sector (in particular flocks in brooding phase) and traders. To prevent the spread of the disease at national level, a strategy has been defined based on the classification of companies on different levels of risk (Ministerial Decree 25 June 2010). These measures included the implementation of more stringent biosecurity protocols and better control of movements. According to the defined procedure, persons responsible for brooding flocks must be accredited and guarantee compliance with high structural, managerial and health requirements in order to be able to trade nationally. Based on the risk situation and the persistent circulation of low pathogenic influenza viruses in the rural and ornamental sector, it was essential to include these categories in the surveillance plan. Controls are carried out with different methods and rates depending on the species bred and the characteristics of the trade flows.

Figure 2. Map of identified risk-areas by the administrative division



The total number of samples to be collected in 2019 is 63.380 (Tables 3. and 4. in the Annex 2. present the samples tested during the first semester of 2019).

2.4 Wild bird monitoring

The passive surveillance is also mandatory for wild water birds. Birds and samples from animals found dead on the whole territory are collected and tested by the territorially competent official laboratories. Positive and doubtful samples are sent to the IZSVE to be examined for confirmation or exclusion of avian influenza viruses. In some regions, such as those with high density of poultry farms (DPPA), active surveillance is also carried out in wild birds.

3. Measures to maintain freedom status

Poultry farmers apply strict biosecurity measures to reduce the probability of introducing the virus from the wild waterfowl population and surveillance is carried out throughout the year to ensure the rapid detection of any incursion of avian influenza. Biosecurity measures include:

- prevention of access to pests and mammals,
- prevention of direct contact with wild birds and with faecal dropping;
- containment of poultry or fomites that were in contact with poultry during transport; cleaning and disinfection of transport means;
- restricted access;
- biosecurity training;
- hygiene lock to production unit; clean clothing and footwear; closed bedding storage; potable drinking water; flock management “all-in” – “all-out”;
- protected waste storage;
- carcass disposal;
- separation of poultry species; and
- health monitoring with sample collection.

4. Conclusions

Considering that:

- The last outbreak of HPAI was closed on 23 March 2018³;
- Stamping out policy was applied, including cleaning-up and disinfection of all the affected farms;
- It has been confirmed that infection with high pathogenicity avian influenza viruses in poultry has not been reported in the country for the past 12 months, as set up in Article 10.4.4. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code*;
- Surveillance has been conducted in compliance with Articles from 10.4.27. to 10.4.33. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code*.

The OIE Delegate of Italy declares that the country fulfils the requirements for a freedom from HPAI as of 24 March 2019, in compliance with Chapter 1.6. and Article 10.4.4. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* and consistent with the information provided in WAHIS.”

³ Follow-up No 40-final report 2 August 2018: http://www.oie.int/wahis_2/temp/reports/en_fup_0000027434_20180802_193848.pdf

I, the undersigned, Dr Silvio BORRELLO, Delegate of Italy to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), takes responsibility for the self-declaration of freedom from Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza.

Drawn up on 17 July 2019

Signature of the Delegate:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Borrello', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is cursive and stylized.

Table 3. Number of birds sampled and tests performed during the first semester of 2019 divided per region.

Region	Production types sampled	Number of ELISA tests	Number of HI-tests for H5	Number of HI-tests for H7	Number of PCR tests	Number of Positive ELISA tests
Abruzzo	Growers	156	12	12		12
Basilicata						
Campania	Growers				10	
Emilia Romagna	Backyard flocks				30	
	Chicken breeders	561				
	Duck breeders				8	
	Farmed game birds	210				
	Fattening ducks				28	
	Fattening turkeys	955				
	Free range laying hens	195				
	Goose breeders				1	
	Growers	5955			804	
	Laying hens	1860				
	Quail breeders				2	
Friuli Venezia Giulia	Turkey breeders	35				
	Fattening turkeys	70	1	1		1
	Free range laying hens	51				
	Growers	206	7	7	19	7
	Laying hens	30				
Lazio	Fattening turkeys	37				
	Free range laying hens	120	4	4		8
	Growers	340	18	18	8	15
	Laying hens	150	5	5		5
Liguria	Growers	120				
Lombardy	Backyard flocks				15	
	Chicken breeders	705	15	15		9
	Fattening ducks				26	
	Fattening turkeys	2991	90	90		87
	Free range laying hens	64				
	Growers	3213	5	5	256	5
	Guinea fowls	20				
	Laying hens	2359	2	2		2
	Ratites	20				
Marche	Growers	589	2	2	53	2

Molise	Growers	160	6	6		6
P.A. Bolzano	Growers	60	4	4	2	4
P.A. Trento	Growers	5				
Piedmont	Backyard flocks				99	
	Chicken breeders	182				
	Fattening ducks				60	
	Fattening geese				5	
	Fattening turkeys	32				
	Free range laying hens	90	12	12		8
	Growers	794			46	
	Laying hens	642				
Puglia	Growers	60				
Sardegna	Growers	10				
Sicilia	Growers	95				
Tuscany	Growers	667	27	27	22	24
Umbria	Chicken breeders	140				
	Duck breeders				20	
	Farmed game birds	60				
	Fattening geese				10	
	Fattening turkeys	100				
	Free range laying hens	10				
	Goose breeders				20	
	Growers	1266	17	17	60	9
	Laying hens	130				
Veneto	Backyard flocks				30	
	Chicken breeders	460	1	1		1
	Farmed game birds	60				
	Fattening ducks				13	
	Fattening turkeys	3983	2681	2681		34
	Free range laying hens	205	19	19		1
	Growers	1212	66	66	149	22
	Guinea fowls	19				
	Laying hens	1324	58	58		3
	Quail breeders				14	
	Turkey breeders	471	35	35		
Total		33249	3087	3087	1810	265

*All the PCR and HI tests resulted negative for Avian Influenza virus

Table 4. – Number of wild birds sampled and tests performed during the first semester of 2019 divided per region.

Region	Number of wild birds sampled	Number of PCR tests	Number of virus isolation tests	Number of wild birds positive for LPAI H7 virus	Number of wild birds positive for other subtypes (not H5 or H7)
Piedmont	89	89			
Valle d'Aosta	2	2			
Lombardy	77	77			
P.A. Trento	9	16			
Veneto	459	462			
Friuli Venezia Giulia	24	33			
Liguria	22	22			
Emilia Romagna	352	352	1		1
Tuscany	1	1			
Lazio	1	2			
Abruzzo	4	7			
Campania	252	582	4	4	
Puglia	19	30			
Basilicata	1	2			
Calabria	42	153	16		5
Sardegna	10	26			
Total	1364	1856	21	4	6