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Self-declaration by Belgium to recover its Newcastle disease-free status in poultry

Declaration sent to the OIE on 29 November 2018 by Dr Jean-François Heymans, Chief Veterinary Officer of the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (FASFC) and OIE Delegate for Belgium.

I. Situation of Newcastle disease in Belgium - 2018

An initial case of AAvV-1, genotype VIII was identified on 26 April 2018 in ornamental chickens of an amateur keeper in the community of Herstal (Liège province). It was a “hobby” farm with captive birds (other than poultry, including wild birds, according to the OIE definition. This type of bird is referred to hereafter as “other birds”).

Sixteen further cases were subsequently detected on amateur keepers’ farms. In all cases, the new strain of the virus was isolated. It was a strain that had already been found in South-East Asia and had rapidly spread to the Middle East, North Africa and South-East Europe.

On 4 July 2018, an initial outbreak of AAvV -1, genotype VIII, was confirmed at the premises of a professional poultry trader in the community of Haaltert (East Flanders province), which resulted in Belgium losing its OIE “Newcastle disease-free” status.

Two further outbreaks occurred on 7 and 17 July 2018, in professional laying-chicken breeding operations in the communities of Zulte (East Flanders province) and Waregem (West Flanders province) respectively.

The new strain of the virus was isolated in each of these outbreaks as well.

The events at the professional poultry breeders were declared in the OIE World Animal Health Information System (WAHIS). Each outbreak site was totally decontaminated in line with Chapter 7.6 of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* and the establishments were cleaned and disinfected (on 18 July in the case of the third professional operation).

When an outbreak of Newcastle disease is detected at an amateur keeper's premises, the fowl are either stamped out or vaccinated against Newcastle disease and quarantined for 60 days. The measures were gradually lifted given the favourable epidemiological situation. The incident was closed on 18 October 2018, i.e. 3 months after the end of operations on the third outbreak site, a poultry keeping operation.

II. Intensified control and surveillance in response to the outbreaks

Following the first outbreaks of Newcastle Disease, and to restrict further propagation of the virus as far as possible, FASFC initially enforced a blanket ban on gathering, exhibiting and trade in poultry and hobby poultry throughout Belgium. Shortly afterwards, as the epidemiological situation developed, the measures were eased subject to adherence to strict conditions. These relaxations were enshrined in the Ministerial Order of 24 July 2018.

2.1. Measures taken in the outbreak sites

Belgium implemented a strict, structured policy to stop the disease propagating, eradicate the virus and decontaminate the outbreak sites. This control strategy included the control measures mentioned in European Union Directive 92/66/EEC.

All the control measures and inspections were carried out by the FASFC (Belgian health authority).

When an outbreak occurred at an **amateur keeper's operation**, measures were taken in a 500-metre protection zone around the contamination. As regards the outbreak site itself, all the hobby poultry were either vaccinated against Newcastle Disease, and detained in quarantine for 60 days after the clinical symptoms cleared or alternatively were stamped out. FASFC made its decision on the basis of a risk analysis.

Within the 500-metre protection zone around the outbreak sites, measures were also imposed on all poultry, hobby poultry and pigeon keepers, all of whom were obliged to draw up inventories. All poultry, hobby poultry and pigeons had to be vaccinated against Newcastle Disease, unless their keepers could show valid vaccination certificates. Additionally, a gathering and transport ban was enforced in the zone.

There were no professional poultry farms inside the 500-metre zone around the amateur poultry keeper outbreak sites.

Where the outbreaks involved the three **professional keepers with the presence of poultry**, 3-km (protection) and 5-km (surveillance) restriction zones were set up. They provided for the ban on poultry, hobby poultry and other captive bird movements or gatherings. In the protection zone, all poultry had to be confined or protected to avoid any contact with wild birds. Both in the protection and surveillance zones, each professional poultry keeper was obliged to draw up an inventory of all poultry and birds kept. All poultry in the professional poultry operations also had to undergo a weekly examination consisting of a clinical examination and a head count by the operation's veterinarian. All the applicable measures are laid down in the Royal Order dated 28 November 1994 for the control of Newcastle disease. The outbreak sites were immediately decontaminated, cleaned and disinfected on confirmation of contamination. A total of some 93 000 birds were slaughtered and destroyed.

FASFC informed the professional poultry farms of the measures in force inside the protection or surveillance zones set up around the outbreak site.

The local mayors ensured that pigeon and hobby poultry keepers were also informed and that the prescribed measures were implemented.

Thirty days after the fallow period imposed on each outbreak site, as no clinical sign of Newcastle Disease was observed, each zone was declared disease-free and the 3-km and 10-km restriction zones were lifted.

2.2. Laboratory analyses

The samples taken from 17/04/2018 – 13/10/2018 were analysed by the National Reference Laboratory (SCIENSANO) (see table 1 below).

Tableau 1 : analyses effectuées par SCIENSANO

Test	Samples taken before 4 July 2018	Samples taken after 4 July 2018
Inhibition of hemagglutination	10	20
Isolation AFL	16	22
Molecular test	128	467
Pathotyping	16	17
Total	170	526

Figure 1 below shows the situation observed between 26 April 2018 and 23 August 2018 and indicates the location of the infected farms and the restriction zones.

Figure 1. Location of infected farms and outbreak site restriction zones, 26 April – 23 August, Belgium, 2018



(Source: AFSCA).

2.3. Compulsory vaccination

In line with Belgian legislation (Ministerial Order dated 4 May 1992 covering temporary measures to control pseudo-avian influenza and Ministerial Order dated 25 January 1993 covering the regulation for vaccinating against pseudo-avian influenza that amends the Ministerial Order dated 4 May 1992 covering temporary measures to control pseudo-avian influenza), all individuals in charge of a farm with more than 100 heads of poultry are obliged to use the services of an accredited veterinarian to vaccinate all their poultry against Newcastle Disease.

All hobby birds presented for sale at a public market and all hobby poultry taking part in gatherings (competitions, shows, pigeon races, etc.) must also be vaccinated against Newcastle Disease.

As a result of the outbreaks, strict conditions were imposed on poultry traders for purchasing poultry and hobby poultry (Ministerial Order dated 24 July 2018 covering emergency control measures for Newcastle Disease).

III. Surveillance and early detection system

For many years, Belgium has conducted a passive surveillance programme in domestic poultry farms to maintain its Newcastle Disease-free status in poultry.

The programme includes the following elements:

Obligation to declare any clinical suspicion of Newcastle Disease

Veterinarians and owners of poultry and other birds observing clinical signs that could suggest infection with Newcastle Disease or a significant daily mortality rate in a facility must immediately report the matter to the FASFC health authority. All suspected cases of Newcastle Disease are subject to investigations by FASFC without delay. Samples are taken and sent to the Belgian National Reference Laboratory, SCIENSANO, for extensive analyses.

The compulsory notification of Newcastle Disease is established in Belgian legislation (Royal Order dated 3 February 2014 that designates the diseases subject to compulsory declaration and Royal Decree dated 28 November 1994 on Newcastle Disease control).

IV. Measures implemented to maintain freedom

Apart from the obligation to declare any suspicion, Belgium has implemented biosecurity obligations for all professional operations. All the equipment and farming conditions are laid down in the Royal Decree dated 17 June 2013 on the animal health requirements that govern intra-community poultry and hatching egg exchanges and imports from third countries and on poultry plant authorisation conditions.

Via the FASFC website, professional and amateur poultry keepers and the general public can keep abreast of the situation and also access any information needed about the measures in force. (<http://www.favv-afsca.fgov.be/professional/productionanimale/santeanimale/newcastle/>)

V. Conclusions

The following facts can be put forward:

- Belgium had been free of Newcastle Disease in poultry since 1998 prior to the July 2018 occurrence of three outbreaks in poultry establishments;
- Compulsory vaccination has been in effect since 1993 for all farms with more than 100 heads of poultry and for all hobby poultry taking part in gatherings or sold on markets, regardless of numbers;
- Strict control and eradication measures were adopted; namely stamping out all the birds in one poultry operation and cleaning and disinfection of all affected poultry operations, in compliance with OIE provisions;
- Surveillance was conducted in line with Articles 10.9.22 to 10.9.26 of the OIE Terrestrial Code;
- On 18 October 2018, three months had elapsed since the cleaning and disinfection operations at the last poultry outbreak site had terminated; furthermore, no other outbreak had occurred in poultry, which, in addition to other measures and in application of Article 10.9.3 of the OIE Terrestrial Code, qualifies Belgium to recover its disease-free status.

The Delegate to the OIE for Belgium declares that as of 19 October 2018 the country has met the conditions required to be considered free from Newcastle Disease in poultry, in line with Articles 10.9.2 and 10.9.3 of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* and the information supplied in the WAHIS system.