

Circulation: Foodservice operators

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Avian Influenza- briefing for Foodservice.

Background

Avian influenza (AI) H5N8 has been found in wild and farmed birds in the UK, this is the same strain that has been circulating mainland Europe. To prevent the disease spreading, on 6th December the UK Government put in place a Prevention Zone, this includes a housing order.

On the 16th December 2016 the first case of AI was found in a flock of turkeys, since there has been 9 cases in total and they have been in both backyard and commercial birds,

Where avian influenza has been confirmed, restrictions are put in place to limit the spread of disease, and investigate the source of the infection. Public Health England advises that the risk to public health is very low and the Food Standards Agency has said there is no food safety risk for UK consumers.

What is Avian Influenza?

- Avian influenza is a notifiable poultry disease and it spreads from bird to bird by direct contact and via infected faeces.
- Wild waterfowl – ducks, geese and swans – are the most likely source of infection.
- Disease is being transmitted to commercial and backyard flocks either by direct contact principally with wild waterfowl or via infected faeces which is often walked into the poultry shed or back yard flock.
- The avian influenza virus changes frequently, creating new strains, and there is a risk that one of the new strains may transfer to humans, but there is no evidence that any recent strain of avian influenza has been able to spread directly between people.
- Avian influenza isn't an airborne disease.
- Public Health England advises that the risk to public health from the virus is very low and the Food Standards Agency is clear that bird flu does not pose a food safety risk for UK consumers.

How much of a concern is this outbreak of Avian Influenza?

- This is of great concern to commercial poultry farmers and backyard poultry owners alike.
- This particular strain of the disease is proving particularly aggressive to both wild birds and domestic poultry and has led to a number of outbreaks in Europe and now in the UK.
- The wide range of wild birds affected is also a concern – ducks, swans, geese, cormorants and birds of prey.
- Unlike previous AI outbreaks in the UK, back yard flocks (also known as non-commercial flocks) have also been affected.

How has the outbreak been managed?

- Defra have imposed a Prevention Zone (which includes a housing order) and similar declarations have been made in Wales and Scotland. This means alongside enhanced biosecurity measures, flocks that are usually allowed access to range have to be housed to help prevent the spread of the disease.
- Under EU regulations there is a 12 week derogation which allows producers to market products as free range. Both the EU derogation and the AI Prevention Zone (including the housing order) are due to expire on 28th February. If it is lifted then poultry can be let out onto the range area. If not, then poultry will remain housed however will not legally be able to be called free range. Labelling will have to change to reflect the loss of free range status.

- In an effort to try to mitigate the impacts while still managing the spread of AI, Defra plans to introduce “Higher Risk Areas” from 28 February. Farmers in these Higher Risk Areas have two options available to them:
 - Continue to house the birds – free range status will be lost.
 - Total netting of the range area - this process however can have exorbitant costs, and is a very impractical meaning in all likely hood it is an option that is beyond the reach of most producers.
- Those farmers outside the higher risk areas have an additional option available: Supervised access to outdoor areas – this includes enhanced biosecurity measures, however it means that free range status will be maintained.
- Free range poultry meat accounts for a small proportion of sales, about 3%, whereas free range eggs account for approximately 50% of sales. After the 28th February, unless producers can meet the new requirements, free range eggs will be labelled Barn Eggs, this is a legal classification.

What does this mean to your free range supply?

- A proportion of the free range eggs may have to be reclassified as barn eggs, although these flocks will not be able to go outside the cost of producing the product remains the same and producers are not benefiting through the birds not having access to range.
- It is likely that from the 28th February egg boxes in retail outlets will carry stickers to show the change in classification to barn status, and retailers will have point of sale material informing consumers of the changes. This is a repeat of what has happened in other parts of Europe. The table below shows which countries have lost their free range status and when that happened.

Country	Date of housing order implementation	Date of expiry of 12 week derogation
Germany	08/11	31/01
Netherlands	09/11	01/02
Denmark	15/11	07/02
Hungary	15/11	07/02
France	16/11	08/02
Sweden	21/11	13/02
Finland	01/02	22/02
UK	06/12	28/02
NI	23/12	17/03
Ireland	23/12	17/03

- It is important to understand that animal welfare remains to be an intrinsic part of the producers work, all other free range criteria have been met, and this is about the birds not being able to go outside. Free range poultry that is now housed has had the environment enriched to keep them comfortable while AI is still prevalent.
- It is also important to understand that the cost of production to the producer of free range and the new short term barn arrangement are similar, and not being able to sell product under the free range badge, and the premium that attracts would be disastrous for many UK producers.
- We have asked retailers to support the free range sector, and we are asking foodservice to do the same.
- If you require further information, The NFU poultry team and the NFU food Chain team are here to help you make sense of the changes in the supply chain.

