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Food & Rural Affairs

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Avian influenza (bird flu)

Wild birds: biosecurity measures

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Introduction

On 16 November 2014 Defra confirmed a case of highly pathogenic H5N8 avian influenza in a duck breeding farm in Yorkshire.

Infected wild birds are one possible source of the outbreak and may contribute to further disease spread. The risk of spread through this route can be reduced by maintaining strict biosecurity measures, including minimising contact between potentially infected wild birds and poultry.

This guidance provides information on a range of biosecurity measures you can take. You should read it if you keep birds for commercial, hobby purposes or other purposes.

Your responsibilities as a bird keeper

As a bird keeper, you are responsible for the welfare of your birds. Following the confirmed case of H5N8 the government has advised poultry keepers to maintain good biosecurity on their premises, minimise the possibility of wild birds contaminating the feed or drinking water of poultry and to remain vigilant for signs of disease.

What does the law require?

In the Protection Zone (that is, within 3km of the infected holding) poultry are required by law to be housed or otherwise separated from wild birds. Where housing is not possible, you are required to take all reasonable steps to minimise contact between your birds and wild birds. You must also ensure that your birds do not have any direct or indirect contact with poultry or captive birds on other holdings. This requirement will remain in force until the Protection Zone is lifted.

These are important disease control requirements. Failure to take reasonable measures to comply with these requirements could lead the relevant enforcement authority to bring action against you.

In the Surveillance Zone (that is, between the edge of the Protection Zone and within 10km from the infected holding), you are required to take whatever appropriate biosecurity measures you think necessary to reduce the risk of spread of infection. This could include housing your birds.

Outside the Protection and Surveillance Zones, you are not currently required to implement these measures but you are advised to consider how best to reduce the risk of infection.

If it was considered necessary to reduce the risk of further spread of avian influenza, the government could declare a Prevention Zone in which a range of biosecurity measures would be required (including the housing of birds indoors as far as is practicable). This may be on a nationwide, regional or area basis depending on an assessment of risk and the epidemiology of the spread of the disease. The government has not yet taken the decision to do this, but will keep this under active review.

Impact of housing on organic and free-range status

Within the Protection Zone, keeping your birds separate from wild birds also applies to free-range and organic poultry producers.

The organic status of poultry flocks will not be affected by any legal requirement to house or restrict access to open-air runs, provided that all other requirements of the Organic Standards¹ continue to be met.

Products of free-range flocks (including those which also have organic status) that are required to be housed will retain their free-range status provided the housed period does not exceed 12 weeks².

Within the Surveillance Zone should you decide to house free-range flocks, their products will also retain their free-range status provided the housed period does not exceed 12 weeks.

Outside Protection and Surveillance Zones, the usual organic and free-range marketing requirements apply^{1,2}.

If you have longer term concerns about possible loss of status, for example, organic or free-range, we recommend that you refer to the responsible sector body.

Good biosecurity practice

Good biosecurity is essential in preventing the introduction and spread of disease, regardless of the way in which poultry are housed. This is even more important where birds may be more crowded than usual in accommodation that is unfamiliar to both birds and keepers. It is crucial that you also:

¹ Set out at www.gov.uk/organic-systems-and-standards-in-farming

² See [Egg Marketing Regulation 589/2008](#) and [Poultrymeat Marketing Regulation 543/2008](#)

- Maintain good standards of hygiene.
- Avoid or clean up feed spillages.
- Keep areas around bird accommodation clean and tidy.
- Use specific footwear and overalls when caring for your birds.
- Use approved disinfectant procedures.

Further guidance on biosecurity for bird keepers can be found online at www.gov.uk/government/publications/biosecurity-and-preventing-disease.

Ways to protect your birds from wild birds

One way by which avian influenza may spread to poultry is through contact with infected wild birds. Contact may be direct through mingling, or indirect through faecal contamination of anything that may then come into contact with poultry such as feed, water, utensils or clothing. Therefore the risk of disease spread can be reduced by minimising contact with wild birds.

Maintaining strict biosecurity measures, including housing your birds indoors, is the best way to achieve this. If you can't house all your birds indoors, you should do all you can to minimise the risk of contact with wild birds. Feed should be stored and kept free from wild birds and other poultry. Other ways of separating your flock from wild birds are detailed in this guidance.

Housing

Housing your birds is the most effective way to minimise direct contact. Ensure that wild birds are prevented from gaining access to your birds by covering any openings with netting. This should have sufficiently small holes to exclude wild birds from passing through the openings.

If your birds spend time outside you should consider alternative arrangements. There are different housing options which you can consider, including:

- Making use of existing buildings (such as barns, farm sheds, outbuildings, garages, garden sheds) adapted for your birds. Ensure that any openings are netted to prevent wild birds gaining access.
- Erecting a solid lean-to on the side of existing houses.
- Erecting a new temporary structure with solid walls and roof, or a polytunnel. A polytunnel will be suitable only in cooler weather.

Any proposed building must take into account the welfare requirements of the birds. See the advice on welfare later in this guidance.

Netted structures

You could take other steps if the above options are not practical, for example:

- Erecting a net structure to avoid contact with wild birds.
- When using a netted structure, paying special attention to keeping wild birds from perching on the roof and defecating through it.
- Constructing temporary outdoor pens using straw bales and a tarpaulin roof with bird-proof netted gaps for light and ventilation.
- If bad weather is likely to be a problem it may be necessary to erect a windbreak around your bird-proof structure.

We recommend that you refer to commercial suppliers of anti-bird netting for advice and further information on equipment.

Feeding and watering

There are certain species of bird – such as ostrich, captive wildfowl or geese which are not normally housed during day or night – for which even the minimum housing steps outlined above may not be practicable. In such cases the very minimum you should do is isolate their food and water from wild birds. Available feed and water will attract wild birds; by feeding and watering your birds under cover, the possibility of mingling is reduced. The steps you can take include:

- Providing extra protection to feed and water stations to avoid attracting wild birds.
- Rotating feeding times. Many wild birds learn when captive birds are fed and congregate at these times.
- Preventing your birds from accessing open water that may be contaminated. Ensure that your birds receive only mains or treated water or ensure that reservoirs or storage tanks are covered. Sealed nipple systems can be considered.

Additional deterrents

When designing any protective structure, if posts are necessary, think about incorporating spike strips to deter perching. In all cases you should also consider making use of wild bird deterrents such as flutter tape, flashing lights and scarecrows.

Pheasants, partridges and other game birds

Whilst the outbreak is ongoing, birds should be housed whenever possible. As a minimum, all feeding should take place under cover. However, it may be that housing cannot be effectively implemented once birds have been released into the wild. If the disease risk is high, careful consideration may have to be given to culling birds. Specialist advice is available from representative organisations and the Animal and Plant Health Agency.

Geese

Where small numbers of geese are kept, it may be possible to house them whilst the outbreak is ongoing. However, if that is not possible, temporary netted structures could be used which can cover large areas. Feeding and watering under cover and using wild bird deterrents will reduce geese contact with wild birds.

Captive wildfowl and waterfowl

Where possible, birds should be housed whilst there is uncertainty as to whether the present H5N8 virus is being spread by wild birds. As a minimum, all feeding and watering should take place under cover or in some form of structure to exclude wild birds as far as possible. Separate your birds from wild birds by netting their enclosures, and make sensible use of deterrents to reduce their contact with wild birds if practical. You should consider moving your birds away from large bodies of water that attract wildfowl.

Where separation is not possible, for example where there are large numbers of waterfowl, every effort should be made to discourage wild birds and keep feed separate.

Backyard flocks

In addition to the measures described in this guidance, you should also carefully consider alternatives to reduce contact with wild birds. For example, if you keep your birds near your home, consider housing them in alternative accommodation such as a garden building, a garage or existing redundant building that could be adapted to house your birds temporarily.

Where large numbers of birds are kept, it may not be possible to bring them all indoors, and you should consider all of the alternative methods described in this guidance.

Zoological and other collections of birds

There may be practical issues in implementing some of these measures for zoological collections and sites with rare birds. Examples include:

- Enclosure design that allows mixing with wild birds.
- Possible contact with members of the public for educational purposes.
- The need to move birds across long distances to other sites for the purposes of breeding programmes etc.
- Unique welfare and housing difficulties.

The biosecurity guidance in this document applies to such birds where practicable.

Welfare surveillance

If you house birds that are not used to being housed for a sustained period, this may create welfare and behavioural problems. You should be vigilant for signs such as feather pecking, cannibalism and any other signs of poor welfare such as loss of condition.

To prevent boredom amongst housed flocks, which can lead to feather pecking and increased noise, scratch feeds should be considered.

Overcrowding may become a problem and you must take steps to ensure that the stocking density within each house will not reach the point at which bird welfare is compromised – a particular risk in hot or cold, wet weather.

For chickens and turkeys being reared for consumption, you should consider reducing their growth rate to prevent over-crowding. However you should seek expert advice before doing so as these measures may themselves cause welfare problems.

You should provide fresh litter in all temporary accommodation, and ensure that adequate feed and water, ventilation and lighting is available. You should also consider how to enrich the birds' environment, such as using straw bales.

Always ensure that your birds have clean water – do not use standing water that may have become contaminated by wild birds.

You should also ensure that stockmen inspect the birds more often in order to pick up problems before they lead to the deterioration of bird welfare.

Guidance on maintaining welfare after the release of free-range hens from confinement

Stock keepers will need to be aware that free-range hens may exhibit increased levels of aggression or feather pecking after a period of confinement. The cause of these behavioural changes is not completely understood, but should be treated in a similar manner to any outbreak of these behaviours.

You should inspect livestock more regularly than once a day. This will ensure that any injurious pecking resulting from confinement or post confinement is detected at the earliest opportunity, and enable you to take steps to treat or cull injured birds.

Ideally, hens should be kept inside large naturally-lit veranda-type buildings. If this is not possible, you should maintain light intensity at 10 lux or above in the perching, feeding and walking areas during the housed period and post confinement unless injurious pecking occurs. You should only decrease light intensities for the period where injurious pecking is a welfare problem.

During confinement and release, resources such as food sources, should be increased in availability to reduce competition.

Space allowances for free-range hens are specified in legislation and codes of recommendations and should be maintained at these levels or more.

Re-introduction to the range should be carried out with minimal disturbance to the birds.

Planning issues

Planning permission for bird housing is not always required if the work does not involve building, engineering or similar operations. Permitted Development Rights exist for erecting structures in certain circumstances. Simple structures such as posts and netting might not require permission. It is unlikely, for example, that you would need planning permission if the structure is temporary, mobile, or used for the purposes of agriculture.

However, regulations will differ between commercial and hobby poultry keepers. You should **always check** with your local planning authority in the first instance. You can go to www.planningportal.gov.uk for contact details in England and Wales, and information on Planning Authorities in Scotland is available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/planning/Roles/Planning-Authorities>.

Further help and advice

Effective biosecurity is a primary concern even before any instruction to house birds is issued. Visit www.gov.uk/avian-influenza-bird-flu for advice about bird flu, including general biosecurity advice, or call the Helpline 03459 33 55 77.

Look out for signs of disease in your flock. Increased mortality, falling egg production and respiratory distress may be early signs of a disease problem. If you suspect disease, ask your vet for advice as soon as possible.

Avian Influenza and Newcastle Disease are notifiable diseases. If you suspect either of these diseases you must tell your [nearest Animal and Plant and Health Agency \(APHA\) office](#) immediately. Failure to do so is an offence.

Further guidance on planning is available online at www.gov.uk/developing-farmland-regulations-on-land-use.

Information is also available at <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/disease/avianflu/?lang=en> and www.scotland.gov.uk/avianinfluenza.



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