

AVIAN 'FLU EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP MEETS

The Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mary Coughlan T.D., (accompanied by Minister of State Brendan Smith) today met with the Avian Influenza Expert Advisory Group as it held its first meeting under the chairmanship of Professor Michael Monaghan of UCD.

The Minister said that the Group considered the extensive range of contingency measures which the Department has already put in place with a view to evaluating their adequacy in the current circumstances and concluded that the measures in place are sufficient at this time (details of these measures are available on the Department's website).

Ms. Coughlan added that the Group also gave some initial consideration to her specific request 'to advise her as to the circumstances in which the compulsory housing of domestic poultry and other birds would be appropriate.' Professor Monaghan advised the Minister that, having regard to the current risk of the introduction of H5N1, the Group did not consider that such a course of action was necessary at this time, though the Group would keep the issue under continuous review.

The Minister also announced today a further enhancement of her Department's helpline facility which has been operating for some months. She confirmed that a new low-call number was being provided with immediate effect. The number is 1890 252 283 and members of the public who want to report dead birds will be able to contact this number 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The Minister pointed out that the helpline is in addition to the existing long standing facility whereby the Department's Head Office is contactable 24 hours a day for reporting of animal disease incidences.

Minister Coughlan said that other agencies, including An Garda Síochána, the Health Services Executive and local authorities are being reminded that calls from members of the public about dead birds should be redirected either to the Department's local office network or to the low-call helpline number (details of telephone numbers for Department's local offices are on the Department's website).

The Minister made clear that the Department's function in collecting and testing dead birds is to operate a surveillance/early warning system. Accordingly, the collection of dead birds would be limited to those species which are more likely to be carriers of the H5N1 virus and that it was not considered necessary for the Department to be involved in the recovery and testing of all dead birds. "It is a much more efficient use of physical and laboratory resources to concentrate on those species such as water fowl which are more likely carriers of the virus". The Department will be advising the public, through advice/information notices in the national newspapers, of the types of birds on which they will be concentrating their attention and advising the public also what they should do in the event that they come in contact with dead birds in the wild.

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