

AVIAN INFLUENZA ADVISORY GROUP MEETS

The avian 'flu Expert Advisory Group established by the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mary Coughlan T.D., held its second meeting today under the chairmanship of Professor Michael Monaghan and reviewed developments since its meeting two weeks ago. In particular, the Group reviewed the latest position in France as well as confirmation of the spread of the virus into Sweden, Poland and Switzerland.

The meeting was attended by an official from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland, who will continue to attend meetings of the Group. The Minister particularly welcomed this development which she said “illustrates the mutual interests which the Departments in Dublin and Belfast share and the challenges that we both face”. She said it was further evidence of the collaborative approach that the two Departments were taking to deal with this issue in particular at this time.

As they had indicated at their first meeting, the Group again reviewed the control measures introduced by the Department and reaffirmed their confidence in their adequacy at this stage and again concluded that the circumstances did not yet exist in which compulsory housing was warranted.

The Group did, though, note the Minister's recent advice to poultry flockowners that they should be taking steps to ensure their ability to comply with such a requirement in the event of its introduction. The Group also stressed the need for flockowners to ensure that the highest standards of biosecurity are being vigorously enforced at all times and noted that the Department is again writing to all flockowners advising them of the need to ensure that all surface water sources are treated to inactivate any possible virus in the water.

At the Minister's request, the Group reviewed the existing ban on the gatherings of poultry for exhibitions, shows, markets as well as pigeon racing. These activities were being licensed by the Department on a case-by-case basis but this facility was withdrawn in recent weeks. Having considered the basis for the ban and the current risk assessment, the Group recommended that the ban should stay in place but that pigeon racing should be allowed under licence within the island of Ireland. This too will be kept under review. Following the meeting, the Minister confirmed her immediate acceptance of the Group's recommendation.

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