

MINISTER RESPONDS TO AVIAN 'FLU IN SCOTLAND

The Minister for Agriculture and Food, Ms Mary Coughlan TD, said that on being advised last evening of the case of highly pathogenic avian 'flu in Scotland, she had undertaken an initial assessment of the situation. The assessment followed direct contacts between her Department and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in London and the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (DARD). The Department of Agriculture and Food has been participating in DEFRA's avian flu exercise in the UK over the past two days.

Ms Coughlan said that the further spread of the virus from mainland Europe was always likely and that her Department had been working on this basis for some time. The Minister confirmed that her Department would be undertaking an immediate risk-assessment as to the implications of this latest development for Ireland. She also confirmed that the Expert Advisory Group that she established in February would be convened for an early meeting. The Group would assess the latest situation and, in particular, would review the control measures currently in place and consider whether any additional measures ought now to be put in place.

The Minister said she noted that the UK authorities had implemented the appropriate control zones around the location where the infected swan was found, as provided for in the EU legislation dealing with cases of highly pathogenic avian 'flu in wild birds. She said that her officials were continuing close contact with colleagues in DARD in Northern Ireland and DEFRA in London.

Ms Coughlan concluded by saying that this development obviously heightened the risk to Ireland but said that her Department was fully prepared and that any additional controls that were considered appropriate in light of this heightened risk would be introduced without delay, in accordance with the Department's avian 'flu contingency plan.

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