

CONTINUED PRO-ACTIVE APPROACH TO AVIAN INFLUENZA THREAT

Responding to comments made this morning by Deputy Naughten, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Ms Mary Coughlan TD, said that she was disappointed that he seemed more intent on creating unnecessary anxiety among the public than constructively assisting ongoing efforts in preparing to deal with avian influenza should an outbreak occur here.

The Minister said that from the point at which the Department first became aware of the case in Scotland on Wednesday evening, she had been fully engaged with her senior officials to assess the implications of this latest development. She confirmed that she had specifically met with her most senior officials yesterday morning to further consider the situation. Likewise, she had kept in touch with all developments during the day.

Ms Coughlan said that her officials had, with the assistance of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, BirdWatch Ireland and the Centre for Veterinary Epidemiology and Risk Assessment (CVERA) in UCD, undertaken a risk assessment yesterday. The Minister confirmed that the conclusion of that risk assessment was that the risk to Ireland had 'increased marginally' on the basis of the situation as it currently exists, i.e. a single swan on the east coast of Scotland but that further measures were not required at this stage. This conclusion also took account of information available from both DARD (Belfast) and DEFRA (London).

The Minister repeated that contingency planning was an evolving situation and that as any new information emerged, full account of it would be taken in informing the Department's decisions. The Department's risk assessment will be made available to today's meeting of the Expert Group. The Minister said that she looked forward to and valued the advice offered by the Group.

"Deputy Naughten seemed to be unaware that the purpose of the Avian 'Flu Expert Advisory Group was to advise me as to the controls in place" said Minister Coughlan but the Minister emphasised that she and her Department have always had, and continue to have, responsibility for day-to-day disease management decisions. Ms Coughlan said that criticism of her Department in relation to the availability of the Helpline number was 'disingenuous'. She also pointed out that the number had been published in the national media on a number of occasions, most recently again this morning. The Minister pointed out that 98 calls had been made to the Helpline yesterday - the highest number in a single day - demonstrating the extent to which the number is known and available. In addition she confirmed that her Department had, as she had undertaken, written to all the emergency services - An Garda Síochána, the HSE and local authorities - advising them of the Department's local Helpline number.

Ms Coughlan also confirmed that in excess of 9,500 poultry flocks have now been registered with her Department. She also said that her Department was again writing to all registered flockowners with advice as to the implications for them of a case on avian 'flu in wild birds and/or in poultry.

In conclusion, the Minister repeated her frequently offered advice that consumers had nothing to fear from the consumption of properly cooked poultry and eggs and pointed out that this had been the consistent advice of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Safer Food, the European Food Safety Authority and the World Health Organisation.

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