

MINISTER COUGHLAN CONFIRMS PRO-ACTIVE APPROACH TO AVIAN INFLUENZA THREATS

The Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mary Coughlan TD, today rejected claims made by Deputy Mary Upton in relation to the Department's preparedness to deal with the threat from avian influenza in poultry.

Minister Coughlan said that the recent deaths of seven members of a family in Indonesia were tragic. She noted that all the circumstances involved were being investigated by the WHO and that scientists has indicated that no evidence had been found to date of genetic re-assortment with viruses from other species or of any significant mutation of the virus. In addition, the WHO had not raised its pandemic alert level. Her colleague, the Tanaiste and Minister for Health and Children and the HSE had contingency arrangements in place for dealing with the threat of this virus to humans. The Minister added that the comments made by the Deputy in fact serve no other purpose than to cause undue concern, which Minister Coughlan said would not have been the intention of the Deputy.

As regards the level of preparedness, Minister Coughlan said that an extensive range of measures was in place to detect the virus if it arrived here and if necessary to deal with any outbreaks that might occur in poultry. Bio-security and other advice is issued on an ongoing basis to flock owners as well as to those travelling to and from affected areas. Contingency planning was an evolving situation and full account was taken of new information as it emerged. The level of preparedness continued to be fine-tuned as evidenced by the slaughter exercise that took place last week.

The Minister also recalled that the measures in place had been reviewed on a number of occasions by the Avian Influenza Expert Advisory Group chaired by Professor Michael Monaghan. She and her Department continued to take a very pro- active approach and to be fully engaged on this issue in conjunction with bodies such as the EU Commission, the Department of Health and Children, DARD (Belfast), the National Parks and Wildlife Service, BirdWatch Ireland, the Centre for Veterinary Epidemiology and Risk Analysis and all the agencies that would be involved in dealing with an outbreak here.

In conclusion, the Minister said that the situation was kept under ongoing review and that she would introduce additional controls if she considered they were warranted in the light of a heightened risk in accordance with the Department's contingency plan.

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