

WRITTEN QUESTION E-3507/02
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to the Council

Subject: Avian influenza epidemic in Italy

The provinces of Verona, Mantua and Brescia are suffering an epidemic of avian influenza caused by a mildly pathogenic strain of the H7N3 virus. So far the influenza is almost exclusively affecting turkey farms. In order to stop the disease from spreading, the Italian authorities will ask the EU to approve the vaccination of the susceptible species in the areas at risk.

However, this approach may mean that poultry produced in the areas where vaccination has been carried out cannot be exported to other Member States. The three provinces together produce around 80% of Italian turkeys and around 20% of total production is exported.

It is therefore clear that an possible export ban will lead to:

- a reduction of around 20% in turkey production;
- the import of poultrymeat from third countries (Brazil and Thailand);
- the loss of the German market;
- a reduction in the area covered by vaccination with the resulting risk of a perpetuation of the disease and modification of the virus, so that it becomes highly pathogenic rather than mildly pathogenic.

Can the Council say:

1. whether it is possible to obtain approval for emergency vaccination, whilst maintaining the possibility of export to other Member States? This was allowed during the previous influenza epidemic in 2000, when the discriminatory test (DIVA) differentiated between birds testing positive (because vaccinated) and negative (because infected);
2. whether it is possible to vaccinate on a massive scale using a heterologous vaccine (H7N1) and continue to export, by ensuring with absolute certainty that the meat of the exported birds definitely does not carry the virus, in that the birds were healthy before they were slaughtered?