

WRITTEN QUESTION E-4011/05

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to the Commission

Subject: Transmission of the H5N1 virus - avian influenza and the ban on hunting

Avian influenza was first identified in Italy during an epidemic more than 100 years ago. Since then the disease has reappeared periodically at irregular intervals in all regions of the world. Not counting the current outbreak in Asia, recent recurrences of the disease were in Hong Kong in 1997/1998 and 2003, in the Netherlands in 2003 and in the Republic of Korea in 2003.

Epidemics start with direct or indirect contact between live domestic poultry and live wild and water birds. However, only in domestic poultry does the virus evolve into a highly pathogenic form of influenza (HPAI), and it is only this that may constitute a danger to human beings.

Neither the previous outbreaks of the disease nor the present crisis have shown that humans being might be infected by wild birds, since many species of waterfowl, in particular geese, ducks and swans, are healthy carriers of the low pathogenic virus (LPAI) only.

Indeed, in all previous cases, and in the current outbreak, scientific studies have shown that avian influenza starts and is spread by the buying and selling of infected live poultry, and not by contact between vulnerable birds and the excrement of poultry found on dirty equipment, cages, feed, vehicles or footwear/clothing.

In light of the above, does not the Commission consider that:

- the EU's strategy for the prevention of a possible avian influenza pandemic should above all be geared towards avoiding direct or indirect contact between wildfowl and domestic poultry;
- the ban on hunting is of no use in preventing the causes of the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza, since hunting brings man into contact with wild birds, not domestic poultry;
- hunting, if subject to normal and customary hygiene measures, may in fact prove to be useful to a certain extent, in that hunters may bring to the attention of the competent authorities any anomalous deaths among wildfowl?