Since our last report on 12 February 2020, Bulgaria has reported its first outbreak of H5N8 HPAI in poultry (or in any birds) since April 2019. The affected premises is a duck farm near the city of Plovdiv, in the centre of the country, on which nearly a third (9,142) of the 15,729 ducks on the holding were reported to be infected. Czech Republic has reported its second outbreak of H5N8 HPAI in poultry this year, on a large commercial holding of 137,500 birds. In both cases, measures in accordance with Council Directive 2005/94/EC have been implemented, including culling of the poultry on the affected premises, followed by disposal of the carcasses. There have been no further cases in wild birds reported since last report.
Situation assessment

Our last report on 12 February provided a full situation assessment on HPAI in Europe. The purpose of this report is primarily to comment on the new outbreak in Bulgaria, and epidemiological changes noted in Czech Republic, and secondarily, to provide a brief update on the current situation in other affected countries in Europe.

Bulgaria’s last reported case of HPAI H5N8 in poultry, was in April 2019. The Bulgarian authorities had attributed the spread of this virus within the poultry sector, in the months prior to that, as due to fomites or environmental contamination, rather than new primary introductions from wild birds (PAFF, 2019). It is unknown at this stage how the virus identified in the present outbreak is related to the strain of virus circulating in Bulgaria in 2018/19 (including in the Plovdiv region), or whether it is more closely related to that which has been identified this year across eastern Europe and Germany.

Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine have reported no new outbreaks since our last report.

According to data available on TRACES¹, GB has not imported any live birds or eggs from any of the other areas surrounding the Bulgarian outbreak; in the weeks prior to and after the detection of disease. However, GB imported one consignment of live poultry (Gallus gallus) from the Vysocina region of the Czech Republic on 27 January 2020.

Conclusion

The OIE/FAO international reference laboratory/UK national laboratory at Weybridge has the necessary ongoing diagnostic capability for these strains of virus, whether low or high pathogenicity AI, and continually monitors changes in the virus.

Taking into account the data reported both here and on 12th February, the limited findings in wild birds across Europe, and the possibility of migration to the UK if the weather were to become colder in Eastern Europe; currently the risk of HPAI in wild birds in the UK is LOW (i.e. no change at present), but we are monitoring this very closely.

The risk for poultry in the UK remains low for introduction of infection onto individual premises; but this will depend on levels of biosecurity, which we recommend should be increased. We are keeping this under review.

The numbers of wild waterfowl in the UK will generally have peaked by January, with most migratory birds already present at their wintering sites in the UK. However, adverse weather may result in further influxes from the continent. Indeed, the bird migration flyways

¹ Trade Control and Expert System
indicated on the map above relate more to spring and autumn passage and may not be particularly relevant at this time of the year. However, it cannot be concluded at this stage that outbreaks in poultry will not spread further west in the next few weeks. Compared with previous years, the relative lack of cases along the Baltic coast is also in contrast to large epidemics with H5 HPAI. Given the geospatial separation and temporal occurrence of cases across Europe to date, it would appear the most likely explanation is that these viruses, which are genetically similar, have derived from a pathway involving genetic reassortment with wild bird influenza A viruses.

The risk of introduction to UK poultry, depends upon the level of biosecurity implemented on farm to prevent direct or indirect contact with wild birds. It should be noted that the virus could potentially survive on pasture in wild bird faeces for several weeks at current ambient temperatures, emphasising importance of these measures.

Due to the lower numbers of H5 HPAI outbreaks observed in Europe in 2018/19 (especially lower incidence in wild birds associated with mortality) compared to previous years, there may now be more limited immunity in the naive wild bird population to H5 viruses, with a large susceptible population of avian hosts in the form of juvenile birds which migrated to the UK in autumn 2019.

We recommend that all poultry keepers stay vigilant and make themselves aware of the latest information on www.gov.uk, particularly about recommendations for biosecurity and how to register their flocks. We will continue to report on any updates to the situation in Europe and, in particular, any changes in disease distribution or wild bird movements which may increase the risk to the UK.


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All outbreaks and cases were taken from the Animal Disease Notification System (ADNS).


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