



Government
Office for Science

Precautionary Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (pre-SAGE) meeting on Highly Pathogenic Influenza A virus (subtype H5N1) of Avian origin in domestic livestock in the United States of America

Meeting 1

Held via Video Teleconference on 01/05/2024

Summary

1. A precautionary SAGE meeting was convened on 01/05/2024 to discuss the outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A (subtype H5N1) in the United States (US), affecting dairy cattle. Although Defra assessed the risk to Great Britain of H5N1 in livestock as very low (29/04/2024), there are high levels of uncertainty in this judgement, and any potential human health impacts.
2. The aim of the meeting was to agree the key areas of scientific and technological uncertainty surrounding the outbreak and agree next steps to address these to enable Ministers to enhance UK preparedness for this risk.
3. The group discussed thresholds for holding further meetings.

Situation update

4. Defra described the situation in the US, noting that there are currently 34 HPAI incidents across 9 states in dairy cattle. It is likely that the original case originated from a virus spillover from wild birds, and subsequent spread is from facilitated transmission between cattle followed by geographically widespread movement of cattle across the US.
5. This particular H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b, genotype B3.13, has not been seen or detected in Europe or the UK.
6. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) provided information on the single human HPAI infection detected in the US, which presented as conjunctivitis in a farm worker with presumed links to an affected dairy farm. While there have been some mammalian adaptations detected in the genome, this HPAI strain does not currently carry mutations which would indicate adaptation for transmission between mammals. UKHSA also provided an update on US actions for testing farm workers.

Science questions

7. The Government Office for Science (GOS) outlined the aim of the meeting which was to agree the key scientific and technological uncertainties surrounding the outbreak and agree next steps to address these in order to support Ministers to enhance UK preparedness for this risk.
8. GOS highlighted that the focus of this meeting was on themes of immediate concern.

Thresholds for response escalation

9. The group agreed that it should reconvene in a month's time, and discussed indicators that would necessitate a further meeting of the group before the scheduled next meeting.
10. The Chair (Government Chief Scientific Adviser) noted that the group would reconvene at short notice if there were any substantial developments that may change the UK risk picture.

List of actions

ACTION: The group to collate the key areas of scientific and technological uncertainty discussed and arrive at consensus on the group's current understanding.

ACTION: GOS to discuss future meeting frequency and communicate a proposal with the group.

ACTION: The group to send suggestions of additional meeting attendees to the SAGE Secretariat.

ACTION: GOS to engage with His Majesty's Treasury on economic considerations.

ACTION: Department for Transport's Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA) to coordinate with Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs' CSA on Social and Behavioural Science.

ACTION: Defra, DHSC and the Social and Behavioural Science for Emergencies steering group (SBSE) to coordinate on longer-term research and development work.

Attendees

Scientific experts (24): Angela McLean (GCSA, Chair), Chris Whitty (CMO), Christine Middlemiss (CVO), Gideon Henderson (Defra CSA), Robin May (FSA CSA), Lucy Chappell (DHSC CSA), Chris Lewis (FCDO dCSA), Sarah Sharples (DfT CSA), Helen Roberts (Defra), Sheila Voas (CVO Scottish Government), Julie Fitzpatrick (CSA Scottish Government), Richard Irvine (CVO Welsh Government), Brian Dooher (CVO Northern Ireland Executive), Alistair Carson (CSA DAERA Northern Ireland Executive), Jas Pal Badyal (CSA Welsh Government), Ashley Banyard (APHA), Thomas Waite (dCMO), Susan Hopkins (UKHSA CMA), Jenny Harries (UKHSA CEO), Rowland Kao (Edinburgh, SAC-ED Chair), Peter Horby (Oxford, NERVTAG Chair), Ian Diamond (ONS), Ian Brown (Pirbright), Meera Chand (UKHSA).

Observers and government officials (3): *Louise Owen (CO), Mary De Silva (DHSC), Natasha Grant (CO).*

Secretariat (11): *Ted Hayden (GOS Director), Jane Williams (Deputy Director National Security, Resilience and Strategy), [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted], [Redacted].*

Total: 38