

# Food industry implicated in Britain's bird flu outbreak

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On January 30, some dead turkeys were found in one of the intensive rearing sheds that form part of the Bernard Matthews turkey farm and processing plant in Holton, Suffolk in eastern England. The following day more turkeys were found dead and by February 3 more than a thousand had died.

Local vets were called in and, at first, E coli was suspected. Only after 48 hours had elapsed since the first bird deaths was the government Department of Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) called in. Their vets established that the birds had died of the highly virulent bird flu strain H5N1. This virus has killed many birds throughout the world since its initial outbreak four years ago. To date, world wide, over 160 people have died of the H5N1 bird flu strain, most as a result of close proximity to diseased birds.

As yet the virus has not mutated to a form where it can be transmitted from human to human. This is an ever present danger. Because of the novel genetic make-up of the virus, and subsequent lack of previous human exposure, the virus has the potential to cause a human flu pandemic on the scale of the 1918 outbreak of "Spanish Flu" in which millions died.

Once it had been established that the turkeys had died of H5N1 type bird flu, the whole of the 160,000 flock of turkeys on the farm were slaughtered. After the cull had taken place, DEFRA scientists investigated the cause of the outbreak of the disease. First inclinations were to suspect transmission from a wild bird that had somehow entered the rearing sheds. Last year a swan found dead in Scotland was diagnosed as having died of the H5N1 virus. It was thought to have flown in from the continent where there have been several outbreaks of the disease.

However, DEFRA scientists analysing the viral DNA from the dead turkeys found it was genetically identical to viral DNA found in domestic geese that had been infected in January this year in Hungary.

It appears a possible link to the Hungary outbreak came as a result of a chance find of a label in a rubbish bin at the Suffolk site. Part of a leaked memo dated February 9 from COBRA, the British government's civil contingencies committee which tackles national crises, published in the February 13 *Daily Mail*, "DEFRA epidemiologists have found a label in a waste bin on the Suffolk site with a reference that indicates it is from a third party abattoir, Gallfoods in Hungary, just outside the restricted zone [i.e, the zone in which bird flu has been found] . . . One possible unconfirmed route is that the abattoir processed birds from within the restricted area."

The Bernard Mathews company has a subsidiary poultry business, the Saga plant, in Hungary. It would seem the Bernard Mathew company had initially failed to mention a possible link between its Suffolk farm and its Hungarian subsidiary. A *Guardian* article of February 10 stated, "For days, the company has maintained that operations in Hungary and Suffolk are entirely separate with no trade between them but yesterday [Feb 9] . . . admitted there was significant trade between the plants . . . that it could have imported infected turkey meat."

Whilst DEFRA had become aware of such a connection between the outbreak in Hungary and that in Suffolk it did not want the information to be publicised. The *Guardian* had published the information on its web site on February 8. The newspaper had been told by a source within DEFRA that a shipment of nearly 40 tonnes of poultry meat from Hungary had arrived at Horton just prior to the turkeys contracting the bird flu.

The source contacted the paper with concerns that DEFRA were not making the information public. The article states, "[B]oth state vets and officials were deeply aware that such information would take the trail away from the hypothesis of a wild bird flying in and spreading the disease, and into the realm of the poultry food trade. The document which discussed the consignment of food

and how it was handled was marked ‘commercial in confidence’ The protection of Britain’s £3.4bn poultry industry appeared to be taking greater priority than the risk to human health.”

The *Guardian* had contacted the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the official body that oversees food safety, to ask what actions they were taking to avoid the possibility of infected food going into the human food chain, only to be told by the FSA that they were unaware of the matter.

The incoming Labour government of 1997 set up DEFRA and the FSA in the wake of the outbreak of “Mad Cow Disease,” or variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD), which to date has claimed nearly 160 human lives. The previous Tory government, after initially denying a link between Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in cows and its human equivalent vCJD, finally accepted that such a link existed

DEFRA and especially the FSA were trumpeted by the incoming Labour government as being free of the commercial pressures that had led to the cover-up of the BSE crisis. The incident at the Bernard Matthew turkey farm shows this is not the case.

An interim report published by DEFRA on February 14 pointed out the proximity of Bernard Mathews’s turkey rearing sheds and its meat processing plant. There were “large numbers of gulls . . . clearly attracted to the site by the presence of the processing plant and . . . the access to waste trimmings . . . in bins . . . Gulls were observed . . . carrying trimmings away from the processing plant and into the area containing the finishing units (turkey sheds) . . . Polythene bags which had apparently contained meat products . . . [had] the potential to be blown across the site . . . there were several points of entry for small birds and rodents . . . [and] extensive water leakage . . . that could allow physical transfer of infection . . . In summary, there are a number of ways that infection could have entered the shed with the clinically affected birds.”

According to the *Daily Mail*, February 17, “It is understood the MHS (Meat Hygiene Service) warned Bernard Matthews on several occasions about leaving the processing plant waste bins open. Now the organisation is investigating prosecuting the company under the Animal By-Product Regulations 2003 for failing to do so.”

The Bernard Matthews Holton turkey rearing site and processing unit is no shoestring operation. There are 22 rearing sheds with 7,000 turkeys in each shed. Nearby, separated by a chain link fence, is an abattoir, processing sheds and cold store. According to the company, bio-

security is given top priority. Bernard Matthews’s company generates a £400 million a year turnover. It is the largest turkey processing company in Europe.

It is still not clear how the bird flu virus entered the turkey breeding sheds at the Suffolk site. The DEFRA report of February 14 notes that “investigations will continue to be all embracing with respect to possible sources of infection and means of introduction of the virus into the premises. Further reports will be made when significant findings are revealed by our investigations.”

An *International Herald Tribune* article of February 12 commented, “Most of the scattered bird flu outbreaks this year probably can be traced to illegal or improper trade in poultry, scientists believe.” The article went on to quote Samuel Jutzi, director of Animal Production and Health at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, saying, “Many of us at the outset underestimated the role of trade. The virus is behaving rather differently than last year—it’s rather enigmatic.”

Speaking at a recent Royal Society of Medicine meeting in London, Professor Sir Roy Anderson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London, warned of Britain’s lack of preparation for an outbreak of H5N1 bird flu that has managed to cross to the human population.

He explained, “This is a virus that is always rapidly evolving . . . It is extremely difficult to predict in which ways it will continue to evolve . . . We currently live in an international jet-setting age, so the range of contacts of people from other countries is far greater than it was four generations ago. (A reference to the 1918 flu pandemic) . . . This makes it harder to control any outbreak . . . The virus will saturate very quickly in the UK, and there will be very little time to contain it.”



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