

Britain: government cuts funding as bird flu outbreak is confirmed

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An outbreak of avian flu, reported November 12, amongst turkeys on a farm at Diss on the Norfolk and Suffolk border of Eastern England was confirmed as being the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain. The turkeys, geese and ducks on the farm, totalling over 6,000, were slaughtered. Within days a second farm owned by the same company, Redgrave Poultry, was found to be infected by the H5N1 disease, although it is about 10 kilometres from the original outbreak.

A protection zone and an extended surveillance zone have been put in place around the two infected sites, with a wider restricted zone covering Suffolk and most of Norfolk. To date nearly 70,000 birds have been slaughtered at six sites, some as a precautionary measure where no H5N1 cases were found.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is the leading government body in monitoring and taking action in response to reported outbreaks of bird flu amongst wild or domestic birds. Its ability to perform the role is being undermined by budget cuts of more than £270 million.

A *Guardian* newspaper report noted, “The measures at Defra have become necessary, in part, because the department has been overwhelmed by huge bills for a series of disasters, from the foot and mouth outbreak to blunders over the payments of billions of pounds of EU cash to farmers. The ministry’s management board was told this week that it had to find an additional £270m from its main budget on top of savings agreed only a month ago.”

According to the *Guardian* Defra had cuts of £200 million imposed last year when the government agency failed to pay out on time the European Union subsidies to farmers.

The government minister in charge of Defra, Environment Secretary Hilary Benn, has responded by

downplaying public responsibility for the round of disasters that have hit Britain this year—foot and mouth, floods, blue-tongue and bird flu. “Is it unreasonable to ask the farming community to bear more of the cost of taking the decisions to deal with animal diseases?” he said.

The source of the current bird flu infection has still not been determined. Fred Landeg, the acting chief government veterinary officer, speaking at the time of the initial outbreak said, “It is too early to speculate how this virus got to these premises, but the initial character of the virus suggests it is of Asian lineage closely related to strains found this summer in the Czech Republic and Germany. It does suggest the possibility of a wild bird source.”

Ornithologists have disputed that wild birds could be the source, saying none have been found in the vicinity and no reports of birds being found dead along migration routes. Dr Mark Avery of the British, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, (RSPB) said, “Jumping to conclusions over the source of bird flu could blind us to courses of action that should be taken.”

Nearly two weeks after confirming an H5N1 outbreak the source of the virus is still to be determined. An article in the *Farmers Guardian* explained that Defra “are working on at least two main theories ... [one theory is] that an infected migrating bird or birds may have visited a lake at Redgrave Park Farm, not far from where its free range turkeys were kept, passing the virus on to domestic wild birds in the area or directly to the turkeys.... While there is little firm evidence to back the wild bird theory, it is understood the possibility of ‘sporadic’ infection in migrating birds has not been ruled out.... Another theory is that the outbreak may have been linked to imported birds or meat from

Europe.”

The article explains that both Redgrave Poultry and its parent company Gressingham Foods import meat products from Holland and France, which are taken to a processing plant near Redgrave Park Farm. It notes, “Epidemiologists have been trying to trace the movements of people and vehicles involved in transportation of the young birds and meat, looking in particular at whether they have visited infected areas in Europe.”

An outbreak of H5N1 bird flu earlier this year at the Bernard Matthews turkey processing complex in Suffolk was suspected to have originated from meat imported from Hungary. The company was criticized for lapses in bio-security and poor maintenance of buildings.

The current worldwide H5N1 bird flu epidemic is still considered a strong candidate by scientists to jump the species barrier to humans and through mutation become contagious between human beings. According to the latest World Health Organization figures the number of humans having caught the H5N1 virus by close contact with birds with the disease is over 330, of which just over 200 have died.

If the virus were to mutate to allow human to human transmission, the fear is that the world could see a repeat of the 1919 flu pandemic in which around 40 million people worldwide died of the disease. Experts calculate that an epidemic of the present flu could kill up to 2.5 percent of infected people.

The government has just announced that it is stockpiling enough doses of the anti-viral drug Tamiflu to cover 50 percent of the population rather than the previous level of 25 percent. But experts have questioned whether Tamiflu would be adequate to deal with an H5N1-type epidemic in humans, suggesting that another drug Relenza should also be made available. Last year two people in Vietnam infected with H5N1 died after treatment with Tamiflu, rapidly building up a resistance to the drug.

Budget cuts, staff cuts and “rationalizations” along with inadequate preparations for a possible epidemic demonstrate an ongoing erosion of the physical and organisational infrastructure by the Labour government in line with its imposition of the dictates of big business.



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