ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD

ACMSF Avian Influenza Risk Assessment Update June 2006

Issue

1. To update the Committee on work carried out by the ACMSF Working Group on Avian Influenza to further consider the current ACMSF risk assessment of acquiring avian influenza through the food chain.

Background

2. In December 2005 the ACMSF agreed to establish a Working Group to carry forward conclusions reached by an expert Group of influenza virologists and epidemiologists following review of the 2003 ACMSF Risk Assessment, and to keep a watching brief on developments. In March 2006 the ACMSF Working Group on avian influenza met to review the current ACMSF risk assessment of acquiring avian influenza (AI) through the food chain.

3. At this meeting the Group considered the risk to human health from acquiring AI from consumption of poultry and eggs from affected poultry, including ducks. Members also reviewed control measures for poultry meat and eggs traded within the EU or imported from third countries. The Group was briefed on the Defra response in the event of an AI outbreak in the UK, and also received briefing from the FSA on poultry infection scenarios in the UK. The human health implications arising from the consumption of vaccinated poultry were also considered.

Outcome

In summary the Group concluded that:

4. Members were not aware of any new published scientific evidence to suggest that the food chain had a role in the acquisition of AI in humans. Review of work undertaken in the Netherlands on AI infection in cats suggested that these animals were susceptible to infection due the high loading of virus in infected chicks and the manner in which cats ingested their food. The Group concluded that there was no new information to consider at this time. However a watching brief on new or emerging scientific evidence and publications needed to be maintained.

5. Cooking precautions in handling and preparing food which are employed to avoid pathogens such as *Salmonella* in U.K. are considered to be sufficient to avoid avian influenza.

6. Prophylactic vaccination of poultry is not currently recommended in U.K. for poultry. If an effective vaccine becomes available its use might be considered. The Group considered it unlikely that there would be any food safety implications associated with the consumption of poultry meat from prophylactic vaccinated flocks, because although vaccinated birds can shed virus, the viral load would be low. Testing of vaccinated birds would be carried out before they could enter the food chain .

7. It was agreed that there were adequate control measures in place for poultry meat and eggs traded within the EU or imported from third countries. Meat imported into the EU was inspected at Border Inspection Posts. Only approved Third country meat imports were permitted into the EU. Meat imports from South East Asia (except Thailand) and most of Eastern Europe were not permitted to enter the EU. Products from Thailand are, at the time of writing, cooked prior to importation which would kill any viruses present. The traceability of eggs was considered to be good and it was noted that it would be possible to trace and recall eggs in the event of an outbreak of AI in laying flocks.

8. At the time of this meeting cases of H5N1 AI had been confirmed in wild birds within the EU. Members noted that Member States had a responsibility to inform other Member States in the event of an outbreak of AI and to ensure that infected birds found within protection and surveillance zones were not traded. Imports from third countries required export certificates, however traceability within the EU might not be as easy. Customs were investigating illegal imports but the volume of illegal imports entering the UK is currently unknown.

9. Waterfowl in some cases do not appear to show obvious signs of clinical disease. Infected ducks might not be identified by veterinary health inspection. The Group considered that AI infected ducks may be viraemic but at a lower titre than occurred in poultry. The Group noted that the UK relied on Border Inspection Posts to control the safety of imported products including ducks from third countries. Defra is reviewing its surveillance of waterfowl.

10. Members noted that in the event of an outbreak Council Directive 2005/94/EC would supersede any legislation in Defra's AI contingency plan.

11. Outside the UK, surveillance had successfully identified AI in other Member States. There had not been a reported case in a poultry flock without the virus also being found to be present in wild birds. It was also noted that in view of the possible absence of clinical signs being exhibited in infected ducks, UK clinical surveillance of commercial

ducks might not identify infection as early as would be expected with other poultry. Additional surveillance is under consideration by Defra and surveillance of commercial ducks and geese are included in an EU survey.

12. The Group identified the need to balance theoretical risks to ensure that responses were proportionate. Members concluded that there would be no added value gained from testing food for AI and that there were adequate systems in place to protect the food chain.

13. The FSA does not plan any additional action to measures outlined by Defra to protect animal health. It is envisaged that products would not be recalled from the market in the event of an outbreak in the UK.

14. The working group will maintain a watching brief.

Summary

- There was no new published scientific evidence to suggest that the food chain had a role in the acquisition of AI in humans.

- Cooking precautions employed to avoid pathogens such as *Salmonella* in U.K. should also be sufficient to avoid avian influenza.

- There were adequate control measures in place for poultry meat and eggs traded within the EU or imported from third countries. Surveillance of waterfowl is under review by Defra.

- There were adequate systems in place to protect consumers from introduction of AI through the food chain.