

## **AVIAN INFLUENZA OUTBREAK IN POULTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

There have been two outbreaks of high pathogenicity avian influenza strain H5N8 in South Africa. One of the infected farms is a very large poultry breeding unit which sells chicks to be reared elsewhere. The second farm seems to be unrelated to this first unit and there is therefore the suspicion that wild birds may have spread the virus between the farms. There are also unofficial reports of wild bird deaths in the area. It is unknown at this time how bad the spread of virus may be or if further premises could be infected. The large poultry producer that had the first outbreak also owns several food brands through which they sell their chicken products. This further increases the possibility of virus being present in poultry products.

Avian influenza or 'bird flu' is a highly infectious viral disease that affects most bird species and can spread rapidly. Some strains of avian influenza can infect humans but the strain involved in the South African outbreak, H5N8, has so far not infected humans despite multiple outbreaks globally. The virus is killed by cooking meat and eggs thoroughly and therefore there is no risk to the public. Also, poultry products already on Island are unlikely to have been affected. You should always wash your hands and clean kitchen surfaces after handling raw poultry products.

However, it can cause devastating disease in chickens with significant mortality rates and marked drop in egg production. There are about 6000 farmed poultry on St Helena and these birds as well as our endemic wild birds, such as the Wirebird, need to be protected. If birds eat egg shells, raw eggs or raw bird meat containing the virus they can become infected. The virus could then spread rapidly throughout the Island and be difficult to get rid of. It is much easier to try and stop the virus getting in through our borders if we can.

Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe have banned imports of poultry and poultry products originating from South Africa as a result.

A number of key factors relating to the disease outbreak are unknown, including possible spread, how long the disease may have been present on the infected farms and how widely chicks from these premises have been disseminated (locally, regionally or nationally). Whilst waiting for further information, a precautionary approach towards poultry product imports from South Africa has been taken to reduce the risk to St Helena's national flock (both captive and wild). As St Helena has limited wild bird migration or temporary avian visitors, the risk of the disease being introduced from non-resident wild birds is lower compared to other countries. Control of imported poultry products from South Africa is therefore worthwhile.

Different restrictions have been placed on poultry products based on the risk of them carrying the live virus and when the birds are likely to have been slaughtered and whether this would coincide with the 'disease window' - when the virus first arrived on the farm but before detection by the South African Officials. The restrictions should be temporary and alternative products can be sourced including poultry products from other countries.

**From Monday, 10 July 2017, all raw poultry products originating from South Africa from all bird species will be prohibited from being landed on St Helena.** Before 10 July, certain frozen products will be allowed as long as they meet certain criteria which can be proven.



Customs, Biosecurity Officers and the Veterinary Officer will be inspecting products arriving on Island and seizing any products of concern. If you have any questions about what products can be imported please do not hesitate to contact either Catherine Man the Senior Veterinary Officer via email: [catherine.man@enrd.gov.sh](mailto:catherine.man@enrd.gov.sh) or Julie Balchin the Biosecurity Officer via email: [julie.balchin@enrd.gov.sh](mailto:julie.balchin@enrd.gov.sh). Both Catherine and Julie can also be reached on tel: 24724.

Inevitably, this will result in some inconvenience to the public and merchants and we thank you for your help and cooperation in protecting our beautiful Island.

**6 July 2017**