

Agenda item 14

Resolution IX.23 - Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI)

Action requested: The Standing Committee is requested to note the recent developments on this issue and to provide advice as appropriate.

1. This paper provides a brief summary of recent issues and developments in relation to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI, i.e., the Asian lineage H5N1 strain of avian influenza) pertaining to the Ramsar Convention since the 34th meeting of the Standing Committee (April 2006).
2. The 34th meeting of the Standing Committee considered some then-recent matters arising on the topic, and adopted the following Decision:

Decision SC34-15: The Standing Committee stressed that the terms of Resolution IX.23 on highly pathogenic avian influenza should be followed by all Contracting Parties, especially in relation to issues of killing wild birds and the destruction or substantive modification of wetlands, and that the Parties should take a fully integrated approach to managing avian influenza risks.

3. In its 2006-2008 Work Plan the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) has a specific task (lower priority task no. 62) derived from the terms of Resolution IX.23 concerning HPAI, as follows:
 - i) continue participation in the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza as resources and competencies permit;
 - ii) provide relevant input to practical measures to reduce the risk of disease transmission between wild, captive and domesticated birds, to those agencies developing contingency and wetland management plans related to HPAI; and
 - iii) assist, with relevant international agencies and the Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza, in sharing information, including practical advice that will assist countries to respond to this serious and rapidly deteriorating situation, reporting back on progress to the Standing Committee and to COP10.
4. The STRP's task lead for this work is Mr David Stroud, appointed lead member for Ramsar site designation and management, who also plays a major advisory role on HPAI and wild birds for the United Kingdom and European Union.
5. The Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza, convened by the Convention on Migratory Species, involves representatives of CMS, the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), FAO, World Health Organization, BirdLife International, Wetlands International, Wildlife Conservation Society and others. Ramsar/STRP is represented by David Stroud. The Task Force has met several times by teleconference and continues to

serve a useful coordination function between the various international organizations, agencies and MEAs with interests in this issue.

6. An “Avian Influenza, Wildlife and the Environment” Web site (www.aiweb.info) has been developed by CMS on behalf of the organizations represented on the Task Force, and it was launched in November 2006. It aims to provide the members of the Scientific Task Force with a Web-based communication platform which will further stimulate the work and public outreach of the group. In particular, it aims to act as a portal for quality-assured information on HPAI issues, for public, media and research communities. This has been a response to international calls for more accessible and higher quality information for media briefing and the necessity of moving to a ‘one-stop shop’ for information for policy makers and others. It does not aim to replace the detailed existing Web resources maintained by Task Force members such as WHO, FAO, etc. CMS and the Task Force are seeking further funding to secure the long-term viability of the Web site.
7. During the past year there have been increasing surveillance and sampling of wild birds to test for the presence of avian influenza in several parts of the world. So far results appear to indicate that in most cases the strains present in wild birds are of low pathogenic variety rather than HPAI H5N1 of Asian lineage.
8. A major project funded by the government of the United States is underway to further evaluate the role or potential role of wild birds in transmission of HPAI H5N1 of Asian lineage worldwide. This project, the Global Avian Influenza Network for Surveillance (“GAINS”) ([see http://www.gains.org/](http://www.gains.org/)) is being coordinated by the Wildlife Conservation Society and involves a number of partner organizations, including Ramsar IOPs BirdLife International and Wetlands International.
9. GAINS is intended to: improve the collection, coordination, and laboratory evaluation of samples from wild birds in order to identify locations of avian influenza viral strains; identify genetic changes in virus isolates; enhance links with wild bird distribution and migration information; and provide an early warning system for global spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI H5N1 of Asian lineage) that threatens domestic poultry and human health as well as biodiversity (particularly avian).
10. The current situation concerning occurrence of HPAI H5N1 of Asian lineage is that there continue to be outbreaks amongst domestic birds in Southeast Asia, and there have also been recent reports of further outbreaks in Egypt. However, as yet there has been no recurrence of the outbreaks amongst wild waterbirds in Europe that occurred during winter 2005/6 and spring 2006. The lack of a repetition of the winter infections of 2005/6 is unexpected, but may be linked to the (so far) very warm autumn and winter in Europe. In late 2006 the FAO undertook an assessment which concluded that “extrapolation of the events of 2005 and those of 2006 could suggest that repetition of the scenario experienced in 2005 in central and western Europe may be unlikely.”
11. A number of international assessments and other reviews have been produced during the past year which respond to some of the calls for information made at COP9. Links to these are available via www.AIWeb.info.
12. An update on any further developments concerning HPAI will be provided to the Standing Committee should they occur.