



THE FALKLAND ISLANDS GOVERNMENT VETERINARY SERVICE

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Avian Influenza / Bird Flu – Guidance Note for Merchant Vessels

Dear Colleagues

This note is to take the opportunity to make you aware of Avian Influenza (bird flu). There are no confirmed outbreaks of highly pathogenic bird flu in the Falkland Islands at this stage. However, we must be prepared for possible bird flu outbreaks ahead of bird migration in October and increased tourism activity.

The key message at this stage is the need for awareness and vigilance and good biosecurity protocols.

Standard information that we are putting to the general public is below, with more specific advice for vessels below. Separate advice notes have been sent to farmers, tour operators, fishing vessels and fishery scientists and protection officers.

What is Bird Flu?

Its full title, Avian Influenza, is a virus which causes a disease in birds, including poultry and wild birds.

What are the typical symptoms of Bird Flu?

The symptoms of bird flu in wild birds and poultry include:

- Sudden and rapid increase in the number of birds found dead in colonies or at sea
- Loss of coordination and balance including swimming abnormally
- Trembling head and body,
- Swollen head,
- Closed and excessively watery eyes,
- Lethargy and depression, unresponsiveness, lying down, drooping wings, dragging legs,
- Twisting of the head and neck,
- Respiratory distress such as gasping, nasal snicking sneezing, gurgling or rattling,
- Discoloured or loose watery droppings, bright green in some species.

What is the Risk to the Falkland Islands?

Since the beginning of 2022, the increasing intensity of avian influenza outbreaks has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of seabirds in the Northern Hemisphere, around the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean and Southern Africa. It is possible that avian influenza could arrive in the Falkland Islands. Migrant birds returning from the north and mixing with wild birds in the Falkland Islands could transmit the virus. This coincides with the arrival of penguins and other flying seabirds for the breeding season. This means we must be prepared for a possible bird flu outbreaks ahead of the bird migration in October.

How does Bird Flu spread?

It is spread from bird to bird through contact with infected saliva or droppings. Domestic poultry are susceptible to the virus.

Can Bird Flu affect people?

A few strains of avian influenza have been recorded as infecting humans, and those which can transmit to humans don't do so easily. The risk to public health during an outbreak is usually extremely low. However, those working in close contact with birds, such as with domestic and commercial poultry or bird researchers, have a higher exposure to risk. Bird flu is not transmitted through properly cooked food. Cooked poultry and eggs are safe to eat in areas where outbreaks have occurred. To minimise the risk further, if you do see sick or dead birds, do not touch them, their droppings, or any water nearby.

Advice for vessels

Bird strikes

It is recommended that birds that would normally be nursed and released following a bird strike/landing on deck are handled as little as possible and returned to the sea as soon as possible (rather than waiting for better weather or dusk etc). Wear PPE such as gloves and face masks if available. Practice enhanced biosecurity and personal hygiene. While bird strikes on vessels that are not fishing are less likely please follow the above advice.

Dead birds

Birds found dead in any number at sea or showing any symptoms of bird flu should NOT be kept for examination and should be disposed of by incineration on board or back into the sea immediately. Crew handling dead birds should wear gloves and a mask and outer clothing that can be disinfected.

Please contact the Veterinary Service for further advice or information. FAQs can be found on the Dept of Agriculture and Environment Department website.

Thank you for your support to help protect the Falklands Islands wild life and public health.

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