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Belgian Avian Influenza H3N1 Outbreak Shows High-pathogenic Behavior

Report Categories:

Poultry and Products

Pest/Disease Occurrences

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Report Highlights:

On June 11, 2019, the EU granted Belgium an exception to the state aid rules, allowing it to take eradication and farmer compensation measures to combat an infectious outbreak of Avian Influenza (AI) H3N1, usually only allowed for high-pathogenic AI (HPAI). The outbreak already affected 60 poultry farms as the Belgian government was awaiting EU approval to take adequate measures. Because AI H3N1 is classified as low-pathogenic, Belgian government measures to help farmers deal with the disease would have been deemed illegal state aid without the EU exception.

General Information:

On June 11, 2019, the European Commission authorized Belgium to provide emergency aid to poultry farmers affected with low-pathogenic Avian Influenza (LPAI) H3N1. The World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) considers such aid as prohibited and unjustified, reserved for OIE recognized infectious diseases like highly pathogenic AI (HPAI). The Belgian Agricultural Minister, Denis Ducarme, had requested exception from the OIE for this AI H3N1 outbreak that is behaving like an HPAI infection, having already plagued more than 60 poultry farms since the first cases were detected in Belgian Western Flanders in early 2019. Meanwhile, the virus has spread to include not only breeder farms, but also farms with laying hens, turkeys and even an ostrich and a broiler farm.

The authorization allows Belgium to officially implement sanitary measures for an HPAI outbreak that should lead to ending the current LPAI outbreak. Measures can now be taken to deflock infected farms and provide conditional compensation for farmers. Euthanized flocks can be transported under controlled conditions for rendering. Infected barns and vehicles entering these farms must now be disinfected.

The direct economic damage of this LPAI outbreak was estimated to already exceed €10 million (~\$11.2 million), but the unintended damage to consumer confidence in Belgian poultry sector is likely to be much more significant.