

## Highly pathogenic avian influenza

During the 2021-2022 epidemiological year, highly pathogenic avian influenza struck Europe, leading to the death or cull of 50 million birds across the continent, with a considerable impact on the poultry sector. While EU legislation establishes strict biosecurity measures and allows vaccine use in such cases, more research and investment is needed to reach definitive solutions.

### What is highly pathogenic avian influenza?

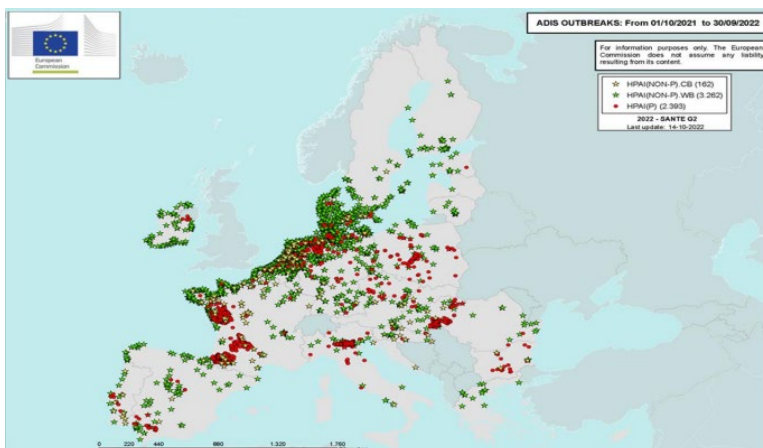
[Avian influenza](#) is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus of the *Orthomyxoviridae* family, primarily affecting poultry and wild water birds. Depending on its subtype, avian influenza viruses may be classified as having either high or low pathogenicity. While the low pathogenic virus (LPAI) can cause a mild illness or be asymptomatic, the highly pathogenic virus (HPAI) causes serious illness in many bird species, spreading rapidly and resulting in high death rates. Some HPAI strains can infect humans, through direct or indirect contact with infected animals, contaminated environments and surfaces, or an intermediate host (such as pigs). Transmission through consumption of poultry products has not been found. However, safe handling of raw meat, thorough cooking and good kitchen hygiene are recommended. Some LPAI viruses can [mutate](#) into highly pathogenic strains. It is therefore important for outbreaks to be managed quickly.

### European legislation

Under [European Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2018/1882](#), HPAI is classified as a 'Category A' disease. This means that, when the presence of the HPAI virus is confirmed in an establishment, the competent authorities implement all stamping-out measures, without undue delay: all birds ([whether infected or healthy](#)) are killed and carcasses safely disposed of, together with all other potentially

contaminated products or materials, after which cleaning and disinfection takes place. A restricted zone of at least 10 kilometres around the affected establishment must be established for a minimum of 30 days after eradication of the HPAI virus in the infected establishment. Additional control measures are regulated by [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2020/687](#). Restriction areas are published in the Official Journal of the European Union ([EU zoning](#)), to allow the trade of unaffected animals (outside the restricted areas). [Surveillance](#) is carried out within the EU.

Figure 1 – Map of HPAI outbreaks in the EU, 1 October 2021- 30 September 2022



Source: DG Health and Food Safety, [European Commission](#), 2022.

### HPAI presence in Europe, impact and possible solutions

HPAI viruses have three main transmission [routes](#): through movement of wild birds (both local movements and seasonal migration), through infected poultry and poultry products, through movement of people, and through physical objects ('fomites').

In risky periods (for example, wild bird migration season) and prior to confirmation of an outbreak, [biosecurity measures](#) should be increased at farm level, such as minimising contact between domestic animals and wild species, reducing human activities in areas where wild birds congregate (mainly ponds



and [wetlands](#)), increasing disinfection of footwear and tyres, and avoiding encouraging wild birds to fly to other areas (through hunting, for example). When HPAI is detected in an establishment, measures must be taken to stamp it out. This can have devastating effects on the poultry industry and farmers, who face huge economic losses as a result. The disease also has implications for international trade, through disruption of trade flows, as well as on consumer confidence. A loss of competitiveness, market share, and supply shortages may result. Member States can decide whether to use a [vaccine](#) against HPAI, if the epidemiological situation and the circumstances are favourable. Currently, only one vaccine is [authorised](#) for use in the EU.

According to the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#) (ECDC), the [European Union Reference Laboratory for Avian Influenza](#) and the [European Food Safety Authority](#) (EFSA), Europe suffered the worst HPAI epidemic in history in the 2021-2022 epidemiological year, with 37 countries affected, frequent outbreaks in several EU countries, and 50 million birds dead or culled.

### Stakeholder position

Representatives of the European poultry meat sector ([AVEC](#)) recognise the heavy impact that the 2021-2022 avian influenza epidemic season had on the sector, with low production and a lack of products leading to lost market share. Recognising that current EU biosecurity measures and surveillance systems may not be enough to protect commercial flocks, AVEC is [engaged](#) in discussions about the use of vaccination. Animal welfare non-governmental organisation [Eurogroup for Animals](#) is [calling](#) for investment in effective vaccines, noting that mass culling of birds causes serious animal welfare problems, while preventive killing of healthy animals should be driven by scientific evidence. In a 2022 [joint](#) statement, [Animal Health Europe](#) (representing the European animal medicines industry), [FECAVA](#) (Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations) and [FVE](#) (Federation of Veterinarians of Europe), advocated vaccination as a promoter of animal welfare through the protection of animal health. The three organisations argued that vaccination could provide an alternative to culling, supporting disease control during outbreaks.

### Council position

In May 2022, EU agriculture ministers [adopted](#) 'Conclusions on highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI): a strategic approach for the development of vaccination as a complementary tool for prevention and control'. The document underlines the importance of biosecurity measures and surveillance, however it also highlights that vaccines should become a complementary tool. To achieve this objective, the Council calls for further development and authorisation of effective and safe vaccines, and for the European Commission and Member States to enhance cooperation with the pharmaceutical industry. Finally, it recommends dialogue with trading partners and the [World Organisation of Animal Health](#).

### European Parliament position

The importance of preventive measures to block HPAI was highlighted as early as 2016, when the European Parliament [adopted](#) the Animal Health Law. In its [resolution](#) of 20 October 2021 on the 'farm to fork' strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system, Parliament expressed concern about the increase in zoonotic diseases, such as HPAI, calling on the European Commission and Member States to encourage better farm management, with high standards of animal health and animal welfare. Parliament also highlighted the importance of promoting the EU's high biosecurity standards at a global level and with trade partners. Furthermore, it stressed the importance of disease prevention and preparedness to containing emerging threats.

'Avian Influenza Controls and Animal Welfare' were also the focus of an [event](#) organised by the Parliament Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals in March 2022. Members of Parliament have posed questions to the European Commission about HPAI from different perspectives, including: [support](#) for affected [farms](#), the role of [hunting](#) in combating the spread of the disease and the use of [live decoys](#) for hunting and the [use](#) of [vaccines](#). Questions have also centred on the lifting of [trade restrictions](#) for products obtained from vaccinated flocks, and trading partners' recognition of [EU regionalisation](#) principles, which set the borders of affected regions (from which animals or produce cannot be moved or commercialised). The aim here is to allow trade to continue outside restricted regions, in accordance with Article 6 of the World Trade Organization's [Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures \(SPS\) Agreement](#).

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