

Focus on Bird Flu

The Netherlands is currently experiencing the worst outbreak of bird flu (avian influenza) since 2003. The virus is now infecting wild birds all year round. Between January 2021 and May 2023, 6.9 million poultry birds were culled to prevent the virus spreading further. Between 2015 and 2021, preventing and controlling bird flu cost about €10 million per annum but leapt to €55 million in 2022. Far more of these costs are being paid from the public purse. Owing to the permanent presence of bird flu, organisations such as the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) are running out of funds to tackle animal diseases effectively. The key question in the Netherlands Court of Audit's recent investigation, Focus on Bird Flu, is therefore, "What measures is the government taking to control the spread of bird flu and how and by whom are they being funded?"

The Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (LNV) accepts that the cost of controlling bird flu will remain structurally higher than in the past. The current organisation of funding means the government will bear more of the cost until the end of 2024. Between 2015 and 2021, the poultry industry itself bore most of the costs, 54% versus the ministry's 46% last year. The cost to the ministry was €0.7 million in 2016 but rose to €26 million in 2021. The amount of funding provided by the European Union is still uncertain. What is known, however, is that the EU will provide less money in the years ahead.

Capacity risks

The process of culling large numbers of poultry will likely fail if several outbreaks of bird flu occur in rapid succession or if a second animal disease occurs at the same time. The NVWA, which coordinates cullings, admits that it is approaching the limits of its capacity to control animal diseases. Some of the companies contracted by the government to cull poultry are facing the same problem.

Resistance to vaccination

The Minister of LNV wants vaccination to prevent the infection of poultry and large-scale culling. 2 vaccines are expected to be piloted in the Netherlands in 2023 and 2024. Whether this will lead to large-scale vaccination against bird flu remains to be seen. For poultry farmers and traders, it is important that both EU member states and private parties (wholesalers and retailers) accept products from vaccinated birds. Otherwise, Dutch poultry farmers will oppose vaccination. Not only will the intensive surveillance programme be expensive but, they fear, they will be unable to sell their poultry meat and eggs.

Wild birds source of infection

The current pandemic also affects wild birds. It has not yet been established in law who is responsible for disposing of dead wild birds and who must bear the cost. Disposal of these birds therefore differs from place to place. The Minister of LNV has been paying for the testing of live wild birds since 2022, in part to learn more about how bird flu spreads. Negotiations between the minister and the poultry industry about the industry's contribution to the Animal Health Fund to control bird flu are planned to start at the end of 2023. Representatives of the poultry industry argued in 2019 that poultry farmers should not be held responsible for bird flu outbreaks because the virus is spread by wild birds. This should be taken into account, they claim, in any financial agreements. The negotiations should lead to a new covenant between the Ministry of LNV and the poultry industry for 2025-2029. Strictly speaking, the Minister of LNV does not need a covenant to have the industry contribute to the Animal Health Fund.

Background

During the debate of the Ministry of LNV's draft budget for 2023, the rapporteurs of the House of Representatives' LNV Committee stated that they had received little financial information on the prevention and control of bird flu. The committee observed that the draft budget provided no insight into estimated expenditure to prevent bird flu in 2023 or on EU funding to control it. It also said that the reasons for assuming that more would be spent on preventing bird flu than on controlling it were uncertain (House of Representatives, 2022).

We decided to investigate government measures to prevent and control bird flu and how they were funded in light of the budget debate and numerous news reports on the culling of poultry and the impact of bird flu on wild birds.