

Avian Influenza Precautionary Confinement of Birds and “Free Range” status

27 January 2017

As a result of an increased risk of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) affecting commercial poultry flocks in Ireland, the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine (DAFM) introduced regulations on 23rd of December 2016 under the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 requiring flock keepers to confine all poultry and captive birds in their possession or under their control in a secure building to which wild birds, or other animals do not have access and to apply particular bio-security measures. The Regulations, entitled Avian Influenza (Precautionary Confinement of Birds) Regulations 2016, provide for precautionary measures, against avian influenza (bird flu). These regulations have particular effects on free range poultry flocks.

Following a review of the HPAI H5N8 situation, it has been decided that the requirement to keep poultry and captive birds confined in Ireland will remain in place. This is due to the continued findings of HPAI H5N8 in wild birds in Ireland, and is considered necessary to protect the high health status of the larger national poultry flock. These measures will remain in place until further notice.

There are EU Regulations that lay down detailed rules regarding marketing standards for eggs and poultrymeat. These Regulations set down minimum requirements that must be met in order to use the term “Free Range”, including rules around access to the range. The Regulations also provide for situations where veterinary restrictions are imposed to protect public and animal health, as is the case currently in Ireland, whereby eggs and poultrymeat may continue to be marketed as “Free Range” for the duration of the restriction but not for more than 12 weeks. In Ireland, the 12 week period expires on the 17th of March 2017.

There are a number of Member States who currently have housing restrictions in place. The issue of what to do after the 12 week period expires was raised at EU Agriculture Council meeting on Monday. The Commission are mindful of the concerns of producers and consumers and saw that it was necessary to strike a balance between the needs of both.

The Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine is working on this issue in consultation with industry, other EU Member States and the EU Commission in relation to this issue where it is hoped that a practical solution for all can be found in the current exceptional circumstances.