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Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural
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The Scottish Parliament
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22 August 2022

Dear Finlay,

AVIAN INFLUENZA OUTBREAK IN SCOTLAND

I write with reference to your letter of 31 May 2022 on the ongoing HPAI H5N1 avian influenza cases in Scotland. The Committee is concerned about the danger this outbreak poses to poultry and other captive birds, as well as to populations of wild bird species, and has agreed to write to you on the following points.

The Committee notes the declaration of an Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ) across Great Britain on 3 November 2021 and seeks further information from the Scottish Government on the efficacy of the AIPZ in curtailing the outbreak within Scotland.

The Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ) was introduced on 03 November 2021 in response to an increased risk from highly pathogenic avian influenza to both wild birds and to poultry and other captive birds. The rigorous scientific [risk assessment](#) process upon which the introduction of disease control measures is based includes analysis of wild bird migratory routes, dead wild bird findings, and outbreaks and strains of virus being identified across Europe, the US, and the rest of the world. The Scottish Government independently reviews these assessments in order to determine the most effective and impactful policy responses for Scotland.

As per the [Notifiable Avian Disease Control Strategy](#), the AIPZ introduced in early November makes a range of robust biosecurity measures mandatory for all keepers of poultry and other captive birds and includes, but is not limited to, measures to prevent spread of the virus through:

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To prevent fomite spread from premises to premises:

- the cleansing and disinfection of walkways between poultry or other captive bird buildings
- the reduction of movements of people and vehicles to limit access to non-essential people on poultry/other captive bird sites
- the cleansing and disinfecting of equipment, clothing and vehicles
- the recording of people and vehicle movements in case of the need to trace disease spread post outbreak

To prevent contact with wild birds:

- feed and bedding to be stored under cover, and for poultry and other captive birds to be fed under cover
- the fencing of outdoor ranges
- the prevention of access by poultry and other captive birds to large bodies of water, which attract wild waterfowl

To prevent contact with rodents or flood water:

- buildings are maintained to prevent access by rodents and wild birds
- buildings and outdoor areas are maintained to prevent ingress from flood water

On 24 November 2021, all UK administrations responded to a further increase in risk from avian influenza by amending the AIPZ to include mandatory housing measures. This meant that it was a legal requirement for all bird keepers across the UK to keep their birds housed and to follow strict biosecurity measures to limit the spread of, and eradicate, the disease. The housing measures were in addition to the previous AIPZ requirements.

Again, in response to risk assessments, on 02 May 2022, housing measures were lifted in the UK for all except those in a Protection Zone. However, the AIPZ remained in place and keepers were encouraged to adopt mandatory biosecurity measures as standard best practice routines on their premises regardless of the disease control measures in place.

Poultry and other captive bird keepers are also encouraged to remain vigilant for any signs of disease in their birds and any wild birds, and seek prompt advice from their vet if they have any concerns. The reporting of a [Notifiable Avian Disease](#) (NAD) is a mandatory requirement.

Regular comms via social media, the Scottish Government website and through local media publications have been issued throughout the current outbreak period. Keepers of more than 50 poultry or other captive birds are legally required to register their flock on the GB Poultry Register. Keepers of less than 50 birds can register voluntarily and are routinely encouraged to do so.

Registered keepers receive updated SMS messages providing advice and important information on avian influenza from the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) on behalf of the Scottish Government.

As the likely route of infection for the 120+ infected premises in the UK has been identified as mainly either contact (direct or indirect) with wild birds, or poor biosecurity practices, we can assume that without the AIPZ and associated measures (including mandatory housing) being in place, the number of infected premises in the UK would have been significantly higher.

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The Committee also asks what measures the Scottish Government has taken to address and mitigate the impact of the outbreak on the poultry industry and wider agriculture, particularly with regards to the poultry and egg supply chains.

On the issue of egg supplies, due to the derogation, free range eggs were still on shelves and available throughout the 16 week derogation period. However, as you will be aware, housing measures were retained this year beyond the 16 week derogation period. Scottish Government were in close contact with industry ahead of this point and agreed mitigations that were put in place following the derogation period coming to an end. This included printing on egg boxes identifying them as 'barn eggs' and signage within retail sectors explaining the situation to the buyers, and that actions being taken were in the interests of the poultry on farm. Scottish Government continue to work with industry going forward on this matter.

In addition to the disease prevention activities described above, the Scottish Government reacts swiftly and comprehensively to suspect cases of notifiable avian disease (NAD) at poultry and other captive bird premises in Scotland.

When HPAI is confirmed in poultry or other captive birds, disease control Protection and Surveillance Zones are established around the infected premises, which involve a range of disease control measures, such as restrictions on the movement of poultry, domestic mammals, carcasses eggs and other poultry products.

Epidemiological investigations are immediately instigated as to the likely source of the infection and to any potential onward spread tracings. Any potential contact premises are also placed under restrictions until the presence of the virus can be ruled out.

For disease control and welfare grounds, any poultry or other captive birds that have not succumbed to the disease are humanely euthanised, whilst a comprehensive programme of cleansing and disinfection is carried out at the premises which, depending on the type of premises, may have to continue over a period of months.

Upon confirmation of HPAI by the Chief Veterinary Officer, the Scottish Government instruct APHA to write to all registered poultry keepers in the Protection and Surveillance Zones providing them with information on controls in place and where to get further help and guidance. A news release, stakeholder email, alerts, and social media updates are also issued, raising awareness of the controls in place and where to source further advice. Mass text alerts are also issued to all registered poultry keepers in those Zones.

Concerning the spread of the outbreak among wild birds, the Committee would welcome an update on the Scottish Government's assessment of the causes of the spread, the impact this is having on Scotland's wild bird populations, and the Government's response plan to monitor and contain the outbreak among wild bird populations.

Data, collated by NatureScot on behalf of partner organisations, indicates:

- Population scale impacts on Great Skua: mortality counts at breeding colonies are over 2,500 birds (1,400 individuals alone have been reported dead on Foula). Other key colonies such as St Kilda, Fetlar, Handa, Noss and Hermaness are reporting 64-85% population reductions in breeding pairs since last counts. Scotland supports 60% of the world breeding population of Great Skua. The scale of impact from mortality figures alone (at time of writing from) is estimated at a loss of 7.7% of the world breeding population and 12.8% of the GB breeding population.

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- Population scale impacts on Gannet: mortality counts at breeding colonies are over 10,000 birds. Up to 25% population reductions in breeding pairs since last counts have been estimated in gannets from sample colonies. Key colonies experiencing high levels of mortality include Noss (>1,000 individuals), Hermaness (>1,000 individuals), Troup Head (>500 individuals) and Bass Rock (>5,000 individuals). Scotland supports approximately 58% of the biogeographic breeding population (Northeast Atlantic) of Northern gannet. It is currently not possible to provide an estimate of loss as most dead birds are lost at sea. Common guillemot mortalities are also into the 1000s with large numbers of beached birds (>500) reported at various locations off the east and west coasts of Scotland.
- HPAI has been confirmed in the Manx shearwater colony on Rum. Rum supports approximately 30% of the world breeding population. It is currently not possible to provide an estimate of loss as most dead birds are lost at sea.
- In addition to the confirmed positive cases in kittiwake on the Isle of May (>125 mortalities), three new suspected outbreaks in kittiwake have been reported at Troup Head, Berriedale (East Caithness cliffs) and Rum.
- Unlike the mass mortalities in tern species being experienced in England, the Netherlands and Norway – all Scottish tern colonies for which reports have been received have had a successful breeding season.
- HPAI positive cases have been confirmed in Great skua (Shetland (Fair Isle, Unst, Foula, Shetland mainland), Orkney (Rousay, Birsay), Western Isles (St Kilda, Lewis), Highland (Handa)), Gannet (Shetland (Noss), Orkney, Western Isles, Highland, Moray, Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Angus Fife, East Lothian (Bass Rock), City of Edinburgh, Ayrshire), Common guillemot (Highland, Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Angus, Fife, East Lothian, Scottish Borders (St Abbs), Islay, Ayrshire), Arctic tern (Fife (Isle of May), Shetland (Boddam & Fetlar)), Sandwich tern (Caithness), Great black-backed gull (Shetland (Fair Isle), Highland (Handa)), Black-headed gull (Aberdeenshire), Herring gull (Swona, Highland, Moray, Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Angus), Kittiwake (Fife (Isle of May), Swona), Puffin (Fife (Isle of May), Glenmachrie, Islay), Razorbill (Highland (Golspie), Islay), Manx shearwater (Highland (Rum)), *Cormorant (South Shields)*
- See map at Annex A. 'Scale of Mass-Die off by Species' 2021-2022
- Population scale impacts on wintering Svalbard barnacle geese (Solway): >30% population reductions. Mortality within the Greenland barnacle goose population estimated to be c.3 % with 1,700 birds in Ireland and 1,000 birds on Islay.

The full scale of the impact in seabirds is not likely to become apparent until next year when surviving adults return to breed. In geese, the impacts will become apparent when wintering flocks return in the autumn.

NatureScot have established the Wild Bird Avian Influenza Task Force, which includes representation from the Scottish Government and environmental non-government organisations. The aims of the Task Force include, but are not limited to:

- Establishing research and monitoring required to understand transmission pathways and long-term impacts on populations.
- Identifying mitigation measures to reduce the severity of future outbreaks and aid recovery of wild birds.

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The developing Scottish Seabird Conservation Strategy is undergoing updates following a full review. As part of this process, we are including actions to review disease contingency plans each year. Following this unprecedented outbreak there are a number of lessons learnt already that will allow us to improve our response. Although the strategy is not yet implemented, it does not prevent us from developing and reviewing plans now. The timeline of the strategy aims to consult later this year with implementation to follow.

Assessment of the causes of the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza

Avian influenza viruses of various strains are likely to be circulating in wild birds globally at any given time. The disease spreads by movement of infected birds, and from bird to bird by contact with contaminated bodily fluids and faeces, either directly or through contaminated objects and surfaces (fomite spread). Avian influenza is not an airborne disease.

Affected wild birds can pass the disease to poultry and other captive birds, and the risk of introduction into domestic poultry/other captive birds will depend on the prevalence and pattern of shedding in wild birds, the level of biosecurity in place on poultry holdings/bird premises and other factors.

The avian influenza virus changes frequently, creating new strains, and there is a constant risk that one of the new strains may spread easily among people. However, there is currently no evidence that the recent strain of avian influenza in the UK, which is the European strain of HPAI H5N1, has been able to spread directly to humans in any significant way. There is also very little evidence currently that the disease has been spread between poultry/other captive bird premises, whilst the overwhelming evidence is that all cases in the current outbreak period have been caused by direct or indirect contact of poultry and other captive birds with wild birds. **There is no evidence of spread from poultry/captive birds premises to wild birds in the current avian influenza outbreak period.**

Monitoring and containing the outbreak amongst wild birds

There is consensus amongst animal disease control specialists, ornithologists and virologists that very little can be done to limit the spread of avian influenza amongst wild birds.

During the winter, shooting of barnacle geese under licence to prevent serious agricultural damage was suspended on Islay, Uist and on the Solway. Measures have been introduced in Scotland in recent weeks by NatureScot to limit unnecessary disturbance of wild seabirds through limiting public access to seabird colony visitor locations, and temporarily prohibiting seabird ringing and licensed research activities that involve handling of birds. At a local level, wildfowling and gannet hunt groups have chosen to limit/stop their activities in recognition of the current strain of avian influenza on the certain wild bird populations.

The Scottish Government has supported the establishment of a major new research consortium (FluMap), headed up by APHA, tasked with developing new strategies to tackle future bird flu outbreaks. The FluMap project will look closely at how the HPAI H5N1 influenza is evolving, and how it is finding its way into poultry farms, often via wild birds.

- Annex A – ‘Scale of Mass-Die off by Species’ 2021-2022

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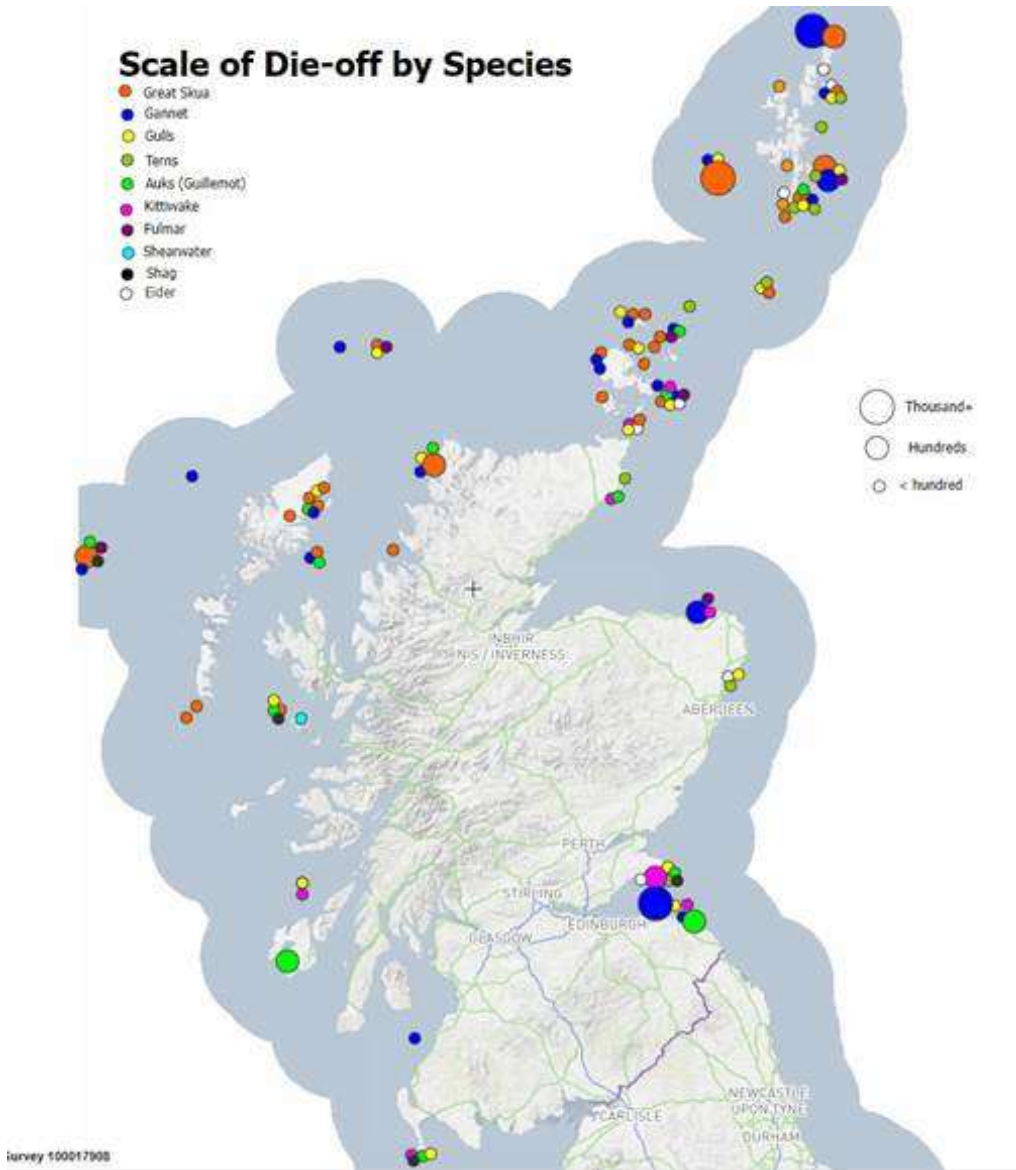
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I have copied in Dean Lockhart MSP, Convenor of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

I would be grateful to receive your response by 29 August 2022.

Yours sincerely,

MAIRI GOUGEON

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