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Poultry and Products

AI - UK poultry meat consumption remains resilient 2006

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Report Highlights:

UK consumption of poultry meat remains unaffected by the continued international media reports of AI in birds and humans elsewhere in Europe. This situation is not expected to change until human-to-human transmission of AI is confirmed. On Thursday January 5, 2006 the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) reaffirmed its position that the risk of humans acquiring avian influenza (AI) through the food chain is low. However, The FSA reminded consumers to properly handle food during preparation.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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On Thursday January 5, 2006 the Food Standards Agency (FSA) reaffirmed that it considers the risk of humans acquiring avian influenza (AI) through the food chain as low. Further, the FSA reported that evidence from human infection indicates that direct contact with infected birds is the main risk factor, and that consumption of infected chickens has not been identified as a risk factor. As such, the FSA's guidance to consumers remains unchanged: to ensure proper handling during food preparation. When handling raw poultry, the person involved in the food preparation should wash their hands thoroughly and clean surfaces and utensils in contact with the poultry products.

The January 5, 2006 re-iteration by the FSA of its position on the risk of humans acquiring AI through the food chain was prompted by expert advice received from the Advisory Committee on Microbiological Safety in Food (ACMSF). Previously, the FSA asked the ACMSF, which provides independent expert advice to Government on questions relating to microbiology and food, to consider recent developments since it last discussed AI in 2003.

The ACMSF met in December 2005 to consider current information on avian flu and the conclusions from a recent meeting of influenza virologists and epidemiologists. The review group examined current information on AI and its implications for food borne transmission in the UK.

The committee concluded that the recent information on AI had not changed its current risk assessment and, following the meeting, the ACMSF's advice therefore remained:

'The risk of acquiring avian influenza through the food chain is low, and there is no direct evidence to support this route of infection. Evidence from human infection indicates that direct contact with infected birds is the main risk factor, and that consumption of infected chickens has not been identified as a risk factor.'

'Several factors will contribute to preventing or limiting infection following ingestion of viruses, including lack of appropriate receptors, and non-specific defences such as saliva or gastric acid. Proper cooking will destroy any virus present in meat or eggs.'

The Committee also proposed that a working group be established to keep a watching brief on developments.

Following the announcement by the ACMSF, the FSA issued a press release reminding UK consumers of its advice, this being:

'The UK is free from the avian flu virus (H5N1). The Agency considers that the outbreak of avian flu does not pose a food safety risk for UK consumers.'

'The World Health Organization (WHO) advises that in areas free from the disease, poultry and poultry products can be prepared and eaten as usual (following good hygiene practice and proper cooking), with no fear of acquiring infection.'

'Like the WHO, the FSA advises proper handling during food preparation. When handling raw poultry, the person involved in the food preparation should wash their hands thoroughly and clean surfaces and utensils in contact with the poultry products. Soap and hot water are sufficient for this purpose.'

'The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has previously (26 October 2005) issued advice on the importance of thoroughly cooking poultry and eggs. This reiterates long-standing advice about cooking poultry and eggs thoroughly to kill bugs. EFSA, like the Agency, is not

aware of any reports of people getting avian flu from eating poultry or eggs and recognises that the current risk is from people having contact with live birds that have the disease.

'For people, the risk of catching the disease comes from being in close contact with live poultry that have the disease, and not through eating poultry or eggs. Poultry can include chicken, duck, goose, turkey, guinea fowl and so on.'

AI continues to be given substantial coverage in the UK media and, over the past few days, this has included the human deaths in Turkey. However, as was the case when AI was first confirmed in birds in Europe in 2005, the UK public is not expected to reduce its poultry meat consumption in the long term. Indeed, consumption of chicken meat continues to steadily increase in popularity. The re-iteration of the FSA guidance, while coincidental, is timely. However, not until human-to-human transmission of AI is confirmed, AI is confirmed in the UK or the FSA changes its guidance are any substantial changes in UK consumer's poultry meat purchasing patterns expected.