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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI): the health situation and work by the Council

Delegations will find attached a Presidency background note on the above subject, which will be discussed under ‘Any other business’ at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting on 7 April 2022.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI): the health situation and work by the Council

Information from the Presidency

In recent years, the majority of European countries, and a large number of countries worldwide, have been affected by epidemics of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). The current epizootic is the most severe seen in Europe in recent history.

Avian influenza poses a risk to public health insofar as all avian influenza viruses are potentially transmissible to humans. In addition, it is detrimental to animal health and welfare, and it has serious economic consequences for the poultry sectors affected, from the farming sector to the businesses which depend on it downstream.

Current eradication measures consist in completely and rapidly depopulating infected holdings and establishing restricted movement zones, as well as potentially depopulating holdings near the outbreaks as a preventive measure. These measures involve killing a very large number of animals, and they are extremely costly for operators and public finances. As a result, they are becoming less acceptable to the sectors concerned and to society in general.

That is why the French Presidency felt there was an urgent need to consider additional methods of preventing and controlling avian influenza, such as vaccination. In the context of its priorities in the veterinary field, the French Presidency has therefore launched a strategic debate on vaccination against highly pathogenic avian influenza.

The discussion centres on various policy areas that are relevant in terms of a vaccination strategy. It covers health-related, economic and societal aspects, as well as possible ways of increasing the acceptability of vaccination in international trade. The work is aimed at identifying and specifying the areas in which research and development is needed, and it should contribute to the preparation by the European Commission of a mandate for a study by the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA).

To ensure that the views of all Member States were taken into account, the Presidency drew up a questionnaire on the basis of the discussions, and replies were received from all delegations. A summary of the results was presented to the Working Party on Animals and Veterinary Questions (Chief Veterinary Officers) on 28 March 2022, followed by an exchange of views. The initial discussions show that the vast majority of delegations think that vaccination would be a relevant and useful tool for preventing and/or controlling HPAI, in addition to the current prevention and control measures. It is important that the necessary technical and scientific elements be in place to ensure an effective vaccination roll-out.

Furthermore, delegations stressed the importance of ensuring that the use of vaccination would not result in export restrictions by our trading partners. In this context, collective EU action at international level is essential, both at bilateral level with the main trading partners and at multilateral level.

Discussions on this important topical issue will continue within the Working Party on Animals and Veterinary Questions (Chief Veterinary Officers), and the Presidency intends to inform the Council of the results of this work in June.