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REUTERS 

Deadly Asian bird flu reaches fringes of Europe

By Jeremy Smith 2 hours, 30 minutes ago

A strain of bird flu that can be deadly for humans has spread from Asia to the fringes of Europe, the European Commission said on Thursday, warning countries to prepare for a potential pandemic.

EU Health and Consumer Protection chief Markos Kyprianou said a strain of bird flu found in Turkey had been identified as the same H5N1 virus that killed more than 60 people in Asia since 2003 and forced the slaughter of millions of birds.

The European Union's executive was also assuming that bird flu found in Romania was the same virulent strain, he said, though further tests are needed to confirm this.

"The virus found in Turkey is avian flu H5N1 high pathogenic virus," he told a news conference. "It's true that scientists caution us and warn us that there will be a pandemic."

Experts fear H5N1 could mutate into a virus which spreads easily among humans, possibly killing millions of people.

The European Commission has banned imports of live birds and poultry meat from both Turkey, where it was discovered at a farm near the Aegean and Marmara seas, and Romania.

Romania said it had detected bird flu in the Danube delta, a major migratory area for wild birds coming from Russia, Scandinavia, Poland and Germany. The birds mainly move to warmer areas in North Africa including the Nile delta for winter.

Romania's chief veterinarian Ion Agafitei told Reuters scientists detected the avian influenza virus in samples taken from three ducks which died last week.

The samples will be sent to a British laboratory, where it could take up to two days to establish the type of virus, British scientist Ruth Manvell said.

THOUSANDS OF BIRDS CULLED

Thousands of birds have been culled in Turkey and Romania to prevent the spread of the disease.

In Turkey, Yuce Canoler of the Poultry and Breeding Stock Producers, told Reuters there was no need for additional measures on top of steps already being taken by Turkey. "We've already tried to take measures by considering the worse case scenarios."

Farm Ministry official Beytullah Okay told CNN Turk there were no plans to widen the current 3-km (2-mile) quarantine zone around the one farm affected to date.

"All the meat from birds killed in the zone by veterinary teams is healthy. Well-cooked, it can be eaten," he said.

Bird flu began sweeping through Thai poultry flocks in late 2003, all but wiping out markets for what was then the world's fourth largest poultry exporter.

Avian flu is currently transmitted to humans only if they eat or live in close contact with infected birds. But scientists say the H5N1 strain is mutating toward a form that could pass between humans.

Kyprianou said the European Commission was considering establishing a 1 billion euro "solidarity fund" to help pay for anti-virals in the event of a pandemic.

He said the Commission had been in talks with pharmaceutical companies about boosting the capacity to produce such drugs.

EU experts on avian influenza and migratory birds will hold an emergency meeting in Brussels on Friday.

The Paris-based World Organization for Animal Health said on Thursday that 3,673 wild waterfowl had died in Iran, but the cause was unclear.

"No pathological agent has been identified yet," it said on its Web site, citing a report from Iran's chief veterinary officer. "No post-mortem lesions are seen in the dead birds; weakness and death are the only evidence."

In Iran, the veterinary authority said no signs of bird flu had been discovered. "We don't know the reason," spokesman Behrouz Yasemi said. "We have quarantined the area."

Bulgaria has tested around 30 birds discovered dead around the country for avian flu but found no cases of the disease, officials said on Thursday.

Greek health authorities were checking a Portuguese-flagged cargo ship near the port of Piraeus after finding suspect dead and living migratory birds on board.

(Additional reporting by David Evans in Paris, Parisa Hafezi in Tehran, Radu Marinas and Martin Dokoupil in Bucharest and Aine Gallagher in Brussels)

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