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WORLD PARROT TRUST * DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE BORN FREE FOUNDATION

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Experts Warn Wild Bird Trade Risks Deadly Flu Transmission: Flu in Parrot Imported to UK Confirms Warnings

LONDON -- As the European Union struggles to address a looming avian influenza epidemic, a group of leading bird experts and conservation organizations urged the EU to take immediate action to reduce the risk of further outbreaks in Europe by banning the import of wild birds. "While much of the attention has been on migratory birds and poultry farms, the EU has left the door open to avian flu by continuing to import millions of wild-caught birds from much of Asia, all of Africa and Latin America," said Dr. James Gilardi, Director of the Wild Parrot Trust. He continued, "The wild bird trade provides the perfect mixing bowl for disease as shipments from different countries are often combined in the same holding and importing facilities."

Scientists have identified several potential routes by which avian flu might be introduced to and spread through Europe. The most easily controlled route is through the intentional importation of wild birds for pets. The wild bird trade presents a unique risk because, unlike poultry, the birds are taken into individual households and often have close contact with family members. Although there is some risk of transmission when wild birds come into contact with domesticated poultry flocks, the annual importation of more than one million exotic live birds into the EU significantly increases these risks.

The parrot imported into the UK carrying avian flu is the second incident this month where birds imported for the pet trade were found to be infected with the virus. Taiwanese authorities confirmed last week that eight songbirds from a shipment smuggled into Taiwan from China tested positive for highly pathogenic avian flu – H5N1.

This latest incident underscores the weakness of EU quarantine efforts. The mixing of birds from two different shipments and two different source countries directly violated EU bird quarantine regulations. The UK prides itself on its quarantine system and even here the rules were not fully followed. The outcome might have proved far different if the parrot had arrived in one of the many EU member states with less rigorous quarantine processes. "Europe shouldn't wait to find out whether or not its border control and quarantine measures are foolproof. The simplest way to shut down this avenue for the introduction of avian flu into the EU is to ban the import of wild birds. The risks of continuing the trade are now unacceptably high," said Carroll Muffett, Senior Director for International Conservation at Defenders of Wildlife.

Responding to news of the disease detection, UK Animal Welfare Minister Ben Bradshaw announced Saturday that his government has petitioned the European Commission to end wild bird imports into the union. "The Minister's petition is a positive step," said Gilardi.

“but the Commission must follow through on it, and act to end the trade as a matter of urgency. After all, the European Parliament passed a resolution to end this trade 15 years ago, but the Commission failed to act.”

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World Parrot Trust is a UK based charity working around the globe for parrot conservation and welfare. For information, visit www.worldparrottrust.org or www.birdsareforwatching.org.

Defenders of Wildlife is a leading nonprofit conservation organization recognized as one of the most progressive advocates for wildlife and its habitat. Instrumental in the adoption of the US Wild Bird Conservation Act, Defenders has worked to save threatened and endangered birds from commercial overexploitation for more than two decades. For information, visit www.defenders.org.

Born Free Foundation is an international wildlife charity working throughout the world to prevent wild animal suffering and protect threatened species in the wild. For information, visit www.bornfree.org.uk.

Editor's Notes:

Avian flu – strain H5N1 – is potentially lethal to humans and can devastate wild bird populations and poultry. It has so far resulted in the deaths of 67 people – the most recent in Thailand – and to the preemptive slaughter of tens of millions of poultry. Should the worst-case scenario occur and the pandemic arrive, experts predict 7.4 million human fatalities could result.

European Union quarantine regulations expressly require that birds from different shipments be housed separately from each other during quarantine to reduce risks of contamination and disease transmission. Article 1 of the regulations reads, in relevant part:

Article 1

‘quarantine centre’ means premises containing a number of units, which are operationally and physically separated from each other and in which each unit contains only birds of the same consignment, with the same health status and being therefore one epidemiological unit; and within each unit of which the quarantine of imported birds is carried out on an ‘all-in, all-out’ basis; and which are separated from poultry holdings and other bird holdings by a reasonable distance, when taking into account the epidemiology of Newcastle disease and avian influenza as regards airborne spread,

COMMISSION DECISION

of 16 October 2000 laying down the animal health requirements and the veterinary certification for the import of birds, other than poultry and the conditions for quarantine (*notified under document number C(2000) 3012*) (2000/666/EC)

Ends