

= 2007 Bernard Matthews H5N1 outbreak =

The 2007 Bernard Matthews H5N1 outbreak was an occurrence of avian influenza in England caused by the H5N1 subtype of Influenza virus A that began on 30 January 2007 . The infection affected poultry at one of Bernard Matthews ' farms in Holton in Suffolk . It was the third instance of H5N1 @-@ subtype detected in the United Kingdom and a range of precautions were instituted to prevent spread of the disease including a large cull of turkeys , the imposition of segregation zones , and a disinfection programme for the plant .

The cause of the outbreak was not determined . However , it was considered significant that Bernard Matthews regularly transports turkeys and turkey products between the UK and its plant in Hungary , and that the H5N1 strains previously found in Hungary , and those found at Suffolk , were effectively genetically identical .

= = Background = =

= = = H5N1 = = =

H5N1 is a subtype of the Influenza A virus , the viruses responsible for influenza in humans and many other animal species . A bird @-@ adapted strain of H5N1 , called HPAI A (H5N1) for " highly pathogenic avian influenza virus of type A of subtype H5N1 " , is the causative agent of H5N1 flu .

HPAI A (H5N1) is considered an avian disease , although there is some evidence of limited human @-@ to @-@ human transmission of the virus . A risk factor for contracting the virus is handling of infected poultry , but transmission of the virus from infected birds to humans is inefficient . Poultry farming practices have changed due to H5N1 . The cost of poultry farming has increased , while the cost to consumers has gone down , due to fears from H5N1 driving demand below supply .

= = = Recent outbreaks in the UK and rest of EU = = =

The outbreak was the third instance of H5N1 detected in the United Kingdom . The first outbreak occurred in October 2005 among exotic birds imported from Taiwan and South America at a privately owned quarantine facility in Essex , England . The second instance involved a dead whooper swan found to have the virus in Cellardyke , Scotland in April 2006 . A corresponding incidence on a farm in south @-@ eastern Hungary was confirmed by the European Commission on 25 January 2007 .

= = The outbreak = =

Initial signs of the outbreak occurred on Tuesday , 30 January when 55 turkey poults died and 16 had to be killed because they were sick . At least 185 more died the following day .

It was not until 1 February that the deaths were reported to Defra . The farm was sealed off while tests were carried out , on samples taken from the dead birds , at the Veterinary Laboratories Agency in Weybridge , Surrey . Another 1 @, @ 500 birds died on 2 February . Then on 3 February 2007 the H5N1 causation was confirmed .

A 3 km protection zone , 10 km surveillance zone and a restricted zone encompassing 2000 km² were set up . Another 159 @, @ 000 turkeys were slaughtered with the cull being completed on the evening of 5 February . Also on 5 February there was criticism that nearby farmers had not been advised as to the action to be taken . Around 320 workers at the plant were given anti @-@ viral drugs . Although a vet from the site was admitted into hospital , suffering from a ' mild respiratory illness ' during the evening of 6 February , it was found not to be bird flu . The plant was thoroughly disinfected , with cleaning complete on 12 February , and permission being given for production to resume .

It emerged in a highly critical report from Defra that there was a series of biosecurity failings at the Holton plant , some of which were drawn to the company 's attention in the past . These included " gulls were taking turkey waste to roosts on top of the turkey @-@ house 500 m away " and " holes in the turkey houses could have allowed in birds or rodents " . Defra minister Jeff Rooker stated in a House of Lords debate on 22 February that the outbreak was " exclusively a Bernard Matthews Holton problem " .

= = Hungarian connection = =

The Government , on 8 February , admitted that the outbreak may have been caused by semi @-@ processed turkey meat imported directly from Hungary , where the disease is prevalent , despite earlier in the week the Environment Secretary , David Miliband assuring the House of Commons that there was " no Hungarian connection " .

Bernard Matthews had been importing 38 tons of partly processed turkey meat on a weekly basis from their Saga Foods company , in Sárvár , Hungary , to a processing plant next to the farm . Though Saga Foods lies 165 miles (266 km) from where the recent Hungarian H5N1 outbreak had occurred , a company director admitted it was " possible " that some of the meat could have come from the exclusion zone . In response to this revelation , Whitehall expressed concern over biosecurity and whether any meat may have been distributed for human consumption in Britain . On 9 February 2007 the Hungarian authorities started an investigation to try to establish whether there was a connection between the Suffolk and Hungarian outbreaks . On 11 February the investigation revealed that turkey products were still being transported , in both directions , between the plant and Hungary with EU regulations being cited as the reason why a transport ban could not be imposed .

The Hungarian link was dismissed by the European Commission on 12 February . Even so , the H5N1 bird flu strains found in Hungary and Britain were shown to be 99 @.@ 96 % genetically identical and , according to an analysis of the viruses by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency in Weybridge , Surrey , were almost certainly linked . A leak from the Government 's COBRA emergency committee indicated that the authorities were not aware of the Hungarian connection until an investigator found a Gallfoods delivery wrapper in a Bernard Matthews bin . This raised the possibility that the outbreak was due to a " third party abattoir , Gallfoods in Hungary , just outside the restricted zone " . This abattoir might have been a middle man for contaminated poultry farming tools , feed , or product from within the restricted zone , such as a Bernard Matthews owned subsidiary in Hungary .

In response to the incident and allegations of a cover @-@ up , Bernard Matthews himself stated on 14 February " I 'm sorry - but this has not been of our making . There 's been absolutely no cover up at our end . I 've been upset about allegations that we may have withheld information . That is completely untrue . "

Bernard Matthews was given permission to resume its shipments of poultry between the UK and Hungary from 17 February even though Defra indicated that Hungarian turkey products remained the " most plausible " cause of the outbreak .

= = Consequences = =

By 8 February there was a lengthening list of countries that had banned the importation of poultry products from Britain including South Africa , Russia , Japan , and many others but a spokesman for the European Commission condemned the bans as " totally disproportionate " and the British Poultry Council pointed out that exports were less than 9 % of the level of domestic sales . Supermarket sales of Bernard Matthews branded turkeys halved after the onset of the outbreak as shoppers sought out alternatives . One of the biggest ongoing surveys of consumer confidence revealed that , by 13 February 2007 , Bernard Matthews was the least respected and trusted brand in Britain .

Following the outbreak the company confirmed , on 19 February 2007 , that 130 workers would be laid off for a period of twenty days due to a drop in product sales . The Transport and General Workers ' Union then called for the government to provide compensation to the workers affected .

The Transport and General Workers ' Union paid out hardship monies from union funds to union members , on top of any state benefits to which the laid @-@ off workers were entitled and a one @-@ off £ 100 payment from Bernard Matthews .

A row broke out on 1 March 2007 when it emerged that the Government were paying compensation to the company for the 159 @,@ 000 culled turkeys while laid @-@ off workers were receiving nothing . At £ 3 @.@ 75 each for hens and £ 3 @.@ 53 for toms , the payout was then estimated at between £ 537 @,@ 000 and £ 570 @,@ 000 . In the event , though , the actual compensation bill came out at £ 589 @,@ 356 @.@ 89 . The crisis cost Bernard Matthews at least £ 20 m in lost sales and costs .