NEWS AND EVENTS

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Flying backpackers, communications satellites and a network of computers would monitor the movements of wild birds on their annual migrations under a plan proposed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The 6.8-million-dollar plan could also provide the world with crucial advance warning of the occurrence of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus, which causes bird flu. Deploying teams of veterinary and wild bird experts on the ground, it would fill a huge gap in scientific knowledge about where, when and how wild birds associated with HPAI, principally aquatic and shore birds-migrate. "All we have now is a snapshot. We need to see the whole film," says Joseph Domenech, Chief Veterinary Officer of FAO.

The plan involves capturing thousands of wild birds before they migrate, testing sample birds for disease, and fitting some of them out with tiny backpacks weighing less than 50 grams each. After the birds are released, the telemetry equipment inside the packs would track their movements. A system of radio beacons and satellites would then feed data into the computers of ornithologists, ecologists, virologists and epidemiologists round the world. The project is in line with recommendations made at a 2-day international scientific conference on avian influenza and wild birds which ended yesterday. The conference, attended by some 300 scientists from over 100 countries, was organized by FAO and the Paris-based World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). The conference concluded that wild birds do play a role in transporting HPAI over long distances, but that human activities such as poultry production and trade are principally responsible for spreading the disease. It noted, however, that there was a basic need for better understanding of wild bird migration and the associated risks of virus introduction. It also called for telemetry and satellite technology to be used in such studies.

Under FAO's plan, the backpacks would show the migrating bird's exact whereabouts when they stop on their long journeys. Mobile, ground-based teams would then re-test the sample birds for disease and, in the case of a positive return, have a good idea of where the infection originated and where it might head next. Early warning would give governments and producers more time to respond to potential threats -- with great benefits for the poultry industry and society at large. FAO together with the World Health Organization and the World Organisation for Animal Health has initiated a global early warning and response system (GLEWS) which monitors livestock and emerging transboundary diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease, rinderpest, swine fever, ebola, and Rift valley fever. "But so far wildlife and wild birds have fallen into the cracks," Domenech said. The proposed new system, in which several organizations could participate, would feed into the GLEWS system.

A small part of the money to fund the project is already on hand, but FAO would need the help of donors and governments to get it up and flying. For more information on the FAO scientific conference on avian influenza please visit:

http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/subjects/en/health/diseases-cards/conference/index_en.html

Saker falcons with telemetry ©Hunting Falcons International.

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