

EU Imports on Sale at Giant UK Bird Market

The Animal Protection Agency (APA) - a national organisation that campaigns against the trade in wild animals as pets – has today revealed the findings of its investigation into the UK's largest exotic bird market, which took place on Sunday 5th March 2006. Despite assurances by the organiser that all birds on sale at the Staffordshire County Showground would be captive-bred in the UK, APA found evidence of large-scale imports from mainland Europe, where H5N1 bird flu has been identified.

Although importing birds from other EU countries is not illegal, such imports have been widely condemned by experts in the prevention of H5N1 infection. The organiser of the Stafford bird market, Mr Shaun Smith, sought to allay fears of an outbreak of the disease by claiming in the High Court last Wednesday (1/3/06) that no imported birds would be offered for sale. However, he had allowed a large, Belgian-based dealer to book a trade stall and sell birds from abroad.

One dealer boasted that he had on sale birds from a batch of 400 that he purchased from Singapore as late as October 2005—the period in which H5N1 infected birds were found in quarantine. The import into the EU of exotic birds from many South East Asian countries was banned in January 2004. However Singapore was not included in this prohibition until a blanket ban on all wild bird imports into the EU was imposed in late October 2005. According to an expert ornithologist, this meant that until just months ago all S E Asian species could have continued to be moved out of the area via Singapore.

Many sick birds were identified by investigators and reported to the attending RSPCA inspectors and Trading Standards officers. However, as is common at these events, investigators felt overwhelmed by the sheer scale of problems relating to poor animal husbandry – many birds showing stress-related behavioural problems were captured on film.

Elaine Toland, Director of APA, says:

“DEFRA, through its downright incompetence, has yet again allowed an event that has provided fertile conditions in which

avian influenza can spread. As always, the conditions of the licence issued by Stafford Borough Council were not met, proving that poor animal welfare and biosecurity are problems inherent to these events."

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