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Self-declaration of country freedom from infection with high pathogenicity avian influenza viruses in poultry by Azerbaijan

The Declaration was sent to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, founded as OIE) on 2 September 2024 by Dr Galib Abdulaliyev, Chief Veterinary Officer, WOAH Delegate for Azerbaijan, Head of the Animal Health and Biosecurity Department of the Food Safety Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

1. Introduction

Azerbaijan is submitting the following documentation for publication by the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), attesting that Azerbaijan freedom from infection with *high pathogenicity avian influenza* (HPAI) viruses in poultry for the entire territory of Azerbaijan, in accordance with the provisions of Article 10.4.3. of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code)*. This is the first time that Azerbaijan has submitted a self-declaration of freedom from infection with HPAI in poultry to WOAH.

Azerbaijan formally requests that WOAH publishes this self-declaration on the country's freedom from infection with HPAI viruses in poultry.

The starting date of the self-declaration is 01 April 2023. A statement of responsibility for this self-declaration, signed by the WOAH Delegate of Azerbaijan, is contained in [Annex 1](#).

2. Evidence that the disease is notifiable in the entire country

HPAI is notifiable in the whole country. The national legislative acts applied in the Republic of Azerbaijan related to the veterinary system and HPAI control are shown in [Annex 4](#). The most important legal provisions are described hereafter.

HPAI is listed as a notifiable disease ([Annex 4, point 2.4](#)). Owners, handlers, and all other stakeholders in the poultry value chain must report any signs of infectious diseases, including suspicions of HPAI, to the competent authorities. This can be done directly or through their private veterinarian ([Annex 4, point 1.1, Article 19](#))

Food Safety Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (AFSA) can order movement control, isolation of affected birds within the establishment, and disinfection in case of strong suspicion ([Annex 4, point 2.18](#)).

In case of an outbreak, the measures to be taken are laid down in a Decision of the Cabinet of Ministers ([Annex 4, point 2.4](#)). Owners whose birds are destroyed by the Authorities due to an outbreak of HPAI are entitled to compensation by law ([Annex 4, point 2.9](#))

The Contingency Plan ([Annex 5](#)) approved by the State Commission under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan was approved on July 19, 2023. The Plan has been in force since then-

3. History of absence or eradication of the disease in the country

3.1 HPAI situation in Azerbaijan

Only once (in February-April 2006), an HPAI outbreak occurred in the Republic of Azerbaijan. During this period, at the beginning of the epidemic, the H5N1 virus was detected in swans that died on the shores of the Caspian Sea, and outbreaks of wild birds were recorded in the areas near the coast. The outbreaks were detected in the industrial poultry farm in 1 area (Gilazi settlement of Khizi region (40°52'04" N. 49°20'26" N.)), and in backyards in 2 areas (Banovshlar village of Aghdam region, (40°07'44" N. 47°03'4" N.) and Samadabad village of Bilasuvar region (39°32'29" N. 48°19'27" N.). Within the period of infection, 296,000 birds were stamped out, and bird carcasses found in natural areas were incinerated in mobile incinerators.

Live poultry markets were closed for one year from February 2006, and the sale and transportation of live birds in open conditions was prohibited. [Final outbreak ending report](#) sent to WOA April 08, 2006 ([Annex 10](#)).

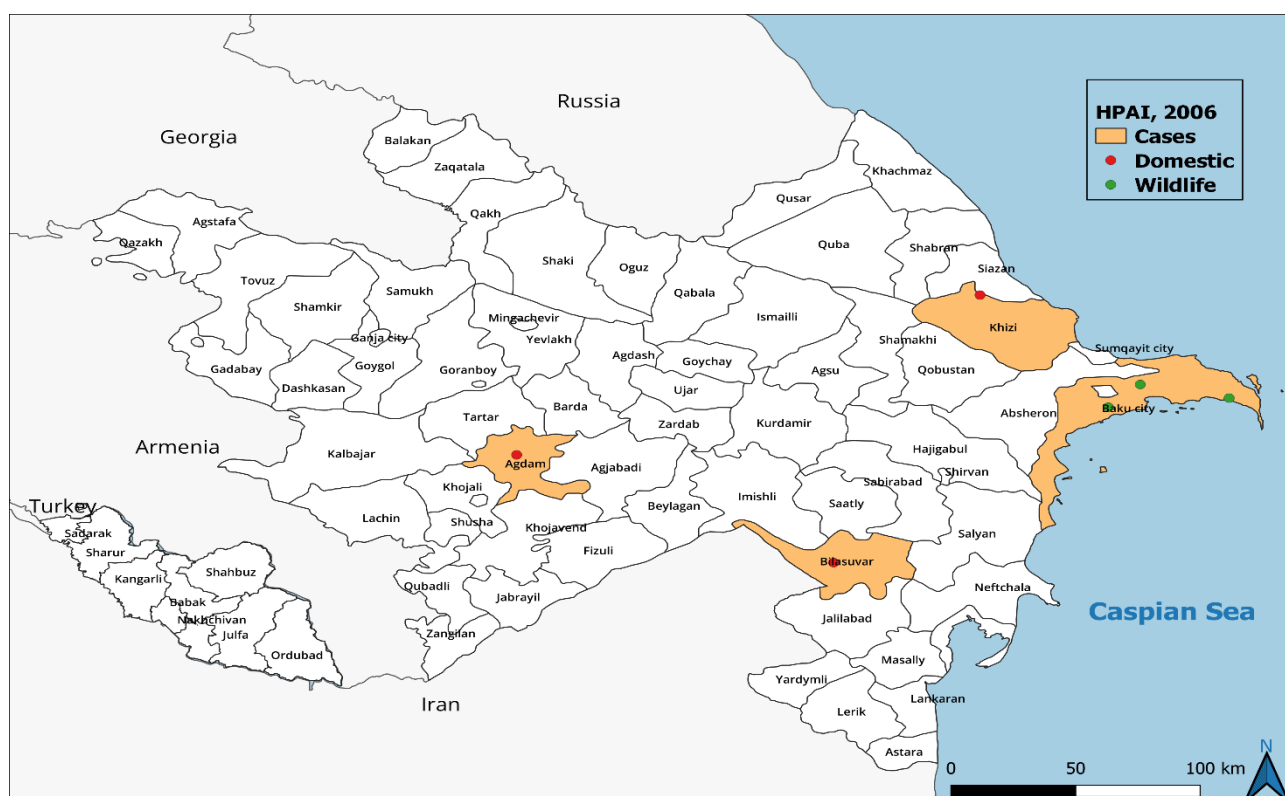


Figure 1. Location of HPAI outbreaks in poultry in Azerbaijan, 2006

3.2. The main strategic directions of the control of HPAI in Azerbaijan

HPAI control includes the following system of special measures:

- protection of the territory of the country from the introduction of the HPAI virus from suspected countries and implementation of necessary preventive measures;
- prevention of the spread of the virus from outbreak areas in case of infection in the country;
- protection of people from infection;
- conducting awareness activities among different social groups of the population and in the relevant production subjects.

The main strategic directions for the control of HPAI are as follows:

- determination of outbreak points;
- development of preventive measures, improvement of the veterinary-sanitary condition of farms, increase of their biosecurity level, strengthening of protective-quarantine measures;
- creation of a unit national veterinary information system for obtaining and managing disease information;

- carrying out epidemiological monitoring including domestic and wild birds in order to assess the epidemiological situation in the country and ensure veterinary control;
- implement systematic laboratory examinations for timely detection of HPAI virus infection among people within the framework of the global epidemiological control system of the influenza disease of the World Health Organization.

4. Surveillance, including an early warning system for all relevant species in the country

4.1 Surveillance in domestic and wild birds

All kinds of poultry farms in the Republic are registered with the country's Veterinary Authority - Food Safety Agency and the veterinary staff can enter farms at any time to conduct surveillance or preventive measures.

The country's veterinary laboratory network has been in existence for decades. The laboratory network includes regional and central laboratories. Since 2006, the diagnosis of HPAI has been carried out at the Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL), and the laboratory has been accredited several times. The last international accreditation was carried out in 2022 ([Annex 6](#)). A Mobile Operation Responsible Unit (MORU) consisting of a group of qualified specialists was established within the CVL. MORU has a BSL 2+ level mobile laboratory, which allows on-the-spot investigation of disease cases without wasting time.

Regular training and simulation exercises are conducted with specialists and all interested parties. There is an administrative chain of command that describes the interrelated activities of all relevant agencies according to the HPAI Contingency plan ([Annex 5](#)).

The capability of the Veterinary Authority to coordinate their mandated activities with a clear chain of command, from the central level (the Chief Veterinary Officer) to the field level of the veterinary service. The activity chain covers surveillance, disease control, food safety, emergency preparedness, and response ([Annex 2](#)).

Seasonal surveillance has to be carried out in industrial poultry farms, family farms, and wild birds. Monthly surveillance is conducted from November to May to account for seasonal epidemiological risk factors, such as migratory birds. When a suspicious situation is encountered, risk-based passive surveillance is carried out in the area where danger is expected.

The Azerbaijan Avian Influenza surveillance program, according to the relevant contingency plan, is based on representative sampling. Therefore, all related stakeholders take part in the sampling, and authorised veterinarians carry out surveillance. Blood and oropharyngeal/tracheal or cloacal swab samples are tested at the internationally accredited Central Veterinary Laboratory of the Azerbaijan Food Safety Institute. The number of samples are set out and controlled by the AFSA. Each concerned holding (farm) is sampled according to the sampling program from the November-May period. The diagnostic method is a hemagglutination-inhibition test (HI) and ELISA to detect H5 and H7 (Chapter 3.3.4. of WOA - *Manual of Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines for Terrestrial Animals, Terrestrial Manual*). Positive reactors to HI and ELISA are followed by a PCR test to confirm or rule out infection.

During the surveillance, the presence of sick and dead wild birds was monitored, and pathological material samples were taken when this was the case. At the same time, wild birds were hunted, and samples were taken and analysed.

None of the samples taken in the framework of routine active surveillance has been positive, and no clinical signs of the disease has been found.

4.2 Surveillance results in industrial poultry and small-scale farms

In the years 2021-2024 (including from April 1, 2023, when the self-declaration period began), samples taken from a total of 325 large farms and 3,676 family farms were analysed. HPAI was not suspected during surveillance. However, in 2021, antibodies against the H9 serotype were found in 99 samples belonging to family farms in 3 villages, and all results were negative in repeated PCR examinations. More detailed information about the surveillance results is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Surveillance in poultry (large and small scale)

Years	Poultry				Backyard and small scale farms			
	# of holdings	# of birds (chicken) million heads	# of samples	Results	# of farms	# of birds (chicken) million heads	# of samples	Results
2021	105	11,5	1183	negative	685	18,7	2057	Positive H9 serotype in 99 samples in backyard farms in 3 villages*
2022	66	11,6	660	negative	734	17,9	2202	negative
2023	62	11,6	620	negative	1384	18,2	4152	negative
January-May 2024	92	11,9	920	negative	873	18,6	2618	negative
TOTAL	325	46,6	3383		3676	73,4	11029	

NOTE:

*- H9 serotype antibodies were detected in the blood serum samples, but the PCR results of the blood samples taken from the same chickens were negative.

Poultry slaughterhouses are also of particular important point in terms of disease traceability, and constant control by AFSA inspectors is ensured in these establishments. As of July 1, 2024, 28 enterprises were registered in the register of poultry slaughtering enterprises ([Annex 9](#))

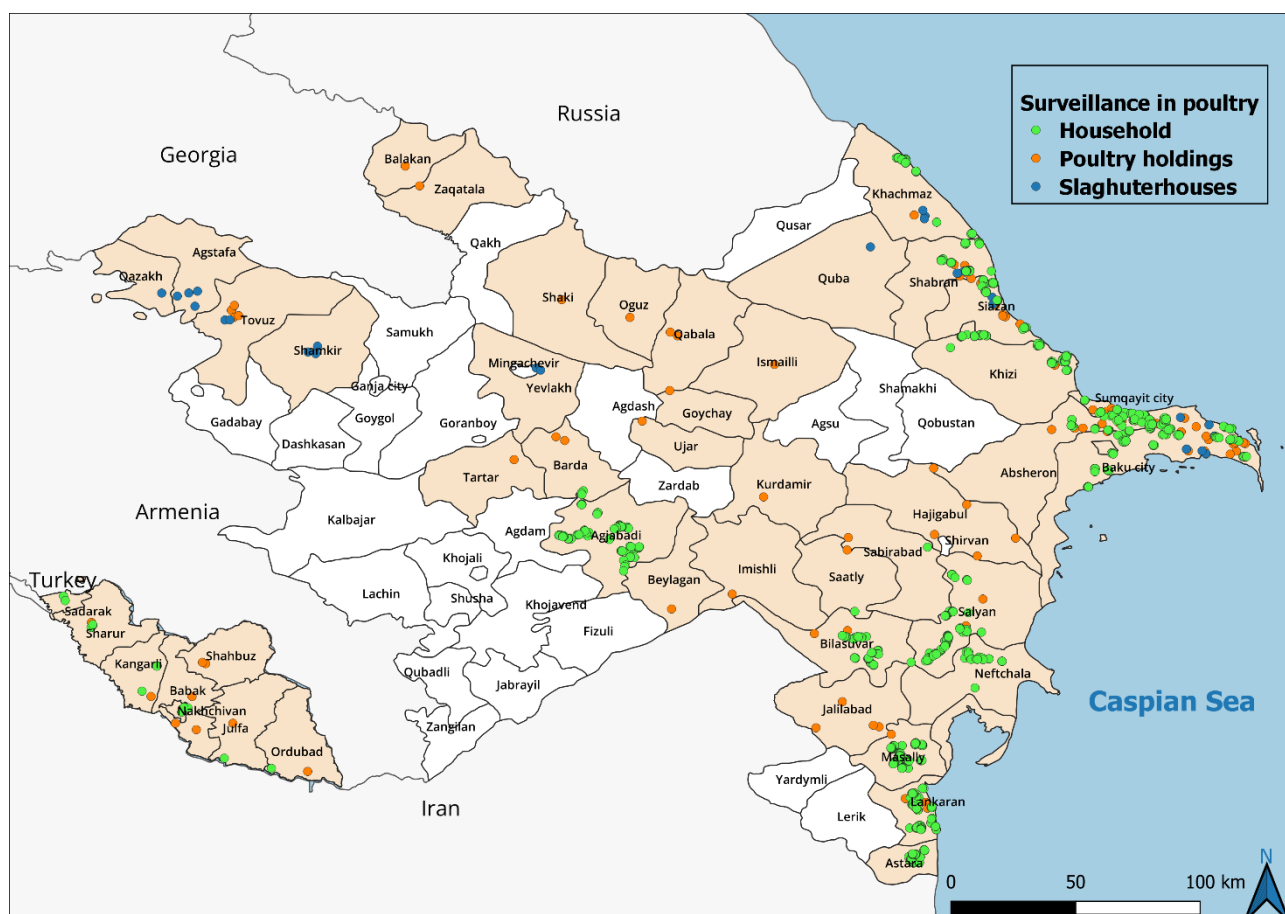


Figure 2. The territory covered by annually surveillance program in domestic birds during 2021-2024 years.

4.3 Surveillance results in wild birds

Surveillance is carried out in domestic birds as well as in wild birds. As shown in Table 2, in 2021, 261 samples of different species of wild birds from seven natural areas were analysed, and in 2022, 2023 and the first five months of 2024, 312 samples from five natural areas, 389 samples from five natural areas, and 287 samples from five natural areas, respectively, were analysed. Antibodies of H9 serotype were detected in a sample taken from 3 birds in 2021 and 1 in 2022. No clinically sick birds were found when during follow-up surveillance activities in the same areas, and all samples were negative in the PCR analysis of samples taken from wild birds obtained by hunting.

Table 2. Surveillance in hunted wild birds*

#	Name of the natural reservoir	# of samples by years							
		2021		2022		2023		January-May 2024	
		# of samples	results	# of samples	results	# of samples	results	# of samples	results
1	Aghjabedi region, Ag Gol National Park	65	negative	100	negative	88	negative	61	negative
2	Bilasuvar region, Mahmudchala hunting farm	0		10	negative	70	negative	51	negative
3	Imishli region, Sarisu hunting farm	11	1 positive (H9)	0		0		0	
4	Lenkaran region, Qızılağaj National Park	48	negative	55	negative	67	negative	53	negative
5	Pirallahi island, Absheron National Park	15	negative	0		0		0	
6	Shabran region, Agzibir hunting farm	53	negative	84	negative	85	negative	64	negative
7	Salyan region, Shirvan National Park	26	negative	0		0		0	
8	Khizi region, Yashma hunting farm	43	2 positives (H9)	63	1 positive (H9)	79	negative	58	negative
	TOTAL	261		312		389		287	

NOTE

*- During the surveillance, samples from 134 different species of birds were taken and analysed. H9 antibodies were detected by ELISA in crow and ducks in 2021, and in swans in 2022.

Information on laboratory examination of dead wild birds in 2022, 2023 and 2024 years is provided in [Annex 12](#). As can be seen from the tables, 23 bird carcasses were found in 15 districts/cities in 2022, 20 in 13 districts/cities in 2023, and 17 bird carcasses were found in 11 districts/cities in 2024. The death of birds mostly occurs in January and February, and partly in the beginning of March, which is related to the lack of feed due to the cold and snowy weather.

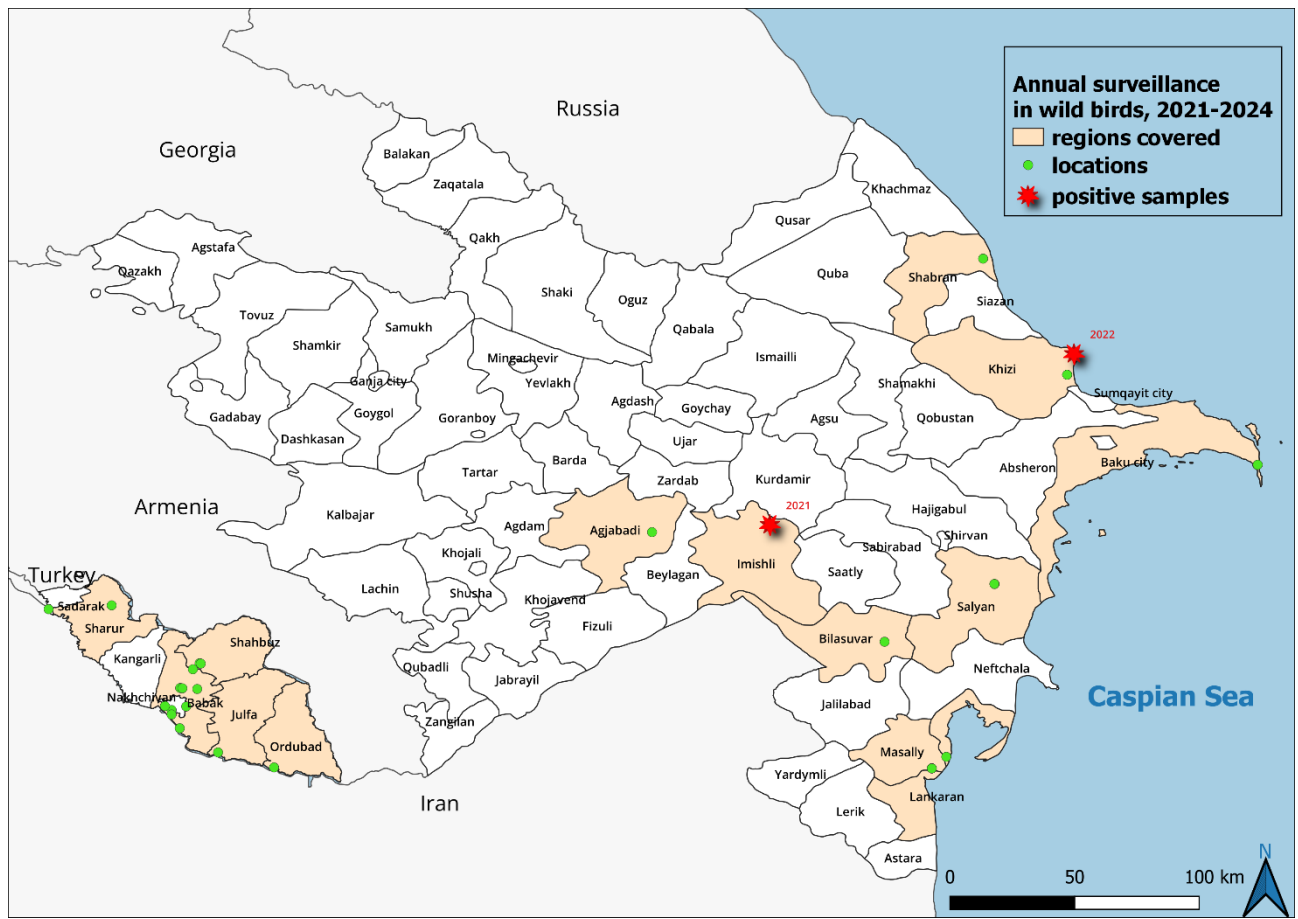


Figure 3. Surveillance in wild birds

5. Measures implemented to maintain freedom in the country

The first and last HPAI outbreak in 2006 was a great lesson, after which serious emergency preparations were carried out in the country. "The State Commission on the Prevention of bird flu in the Republic of Azerbaijan and coordination of the joint activities of all institutions in this field" was established by Order No. 1320 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated February 16, 2006. The commission is chaired by the First Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The commission is still active. Periodic reports are submitted to the Commission on all measures of control (surveillance, vaccination, etc.) against infectious diseases of birds, especially bird flu.

As a disease control measure, regular surveillance, anticipation of strict import requirements and permission to import high-risk products depending on the country's epizootic situation are ensured. During special risk periods (when disease is suspected), the sale and open transportation of live birds is prohibited. Large-scale farms are subject to closed storage regimes and strict biosecurity requirements under the constant control of the AFSA inspectors.

In traditional family poultry farms, the fulfilment of the same requirements is monitored and targeted educational measures are carried out regularly.

5.1 Awareness campaign and risk mitigation measures

Awareness campaigns were held between producers and different social groups of the population, and that is indicated as an obligation of each stakeholder in the contingency plan on HPAI. In addition, besides the strengthening of biological security measures in enterprises, training, seminars and information dissemination companies are regularly held in the country. Information about this is given in [Annex 3](#).

5.2 Registration of poultry holdings

The poultry sector in Azerbaijan consists of large poultry farms (poultry holdings) and family poultry farms (backyard poultry farms). The total statistical poultry population in the Republic is 29,794,9 million (2023) and about 23,995.9 million as of July 1, 2024. All the birds in large farms (except for turkeys kept in one farm) and main backyard farms

belong to the chicken species. However, some farms have productive birds such as geese, ducks and quails. As a decorative bird, hobbyists mainly keep pigeons. As of July 1, 2024, 99 farms were registered in the register of large poultry farms in the Republic ([Annex 8](#)).

Table 3. Information on the poultry population in Azerbaijan

Type of exploitation	2023	2024 (01 July)
Poultry in holdings (mln.)	11635,5	11968,7
Poultry in backyard farms (mln.)	18159,4	12027,2
TOTAL	29794,9	23995,9

5.3 Import or introduction of poultry and poultry products

The import of goods under veterinary control (included life birds are regulated according to the Veterinary Law and the ``Rules for organization of state veterinary control of products under state veterinary control, including imported and exported goods, bringing goods under state veterinary control to the Republic of Azerbaijan and transporting them within the country`` approved by the Cabinet of Ministers ([Annex 4](#) points 1.1 and 2.21).

For the import of poultry products (live birds, meat, eggs, etc.), the importing subject applies to AFSA before import and provides information about the exporting country, goods and enterprise. The data is analysed in AFSA considering WOA/WAHIS data on exporting and transit countries according to Chapter 10.4. of the *Terrestrial Code*, importation is permitted. After that, goods are imported into the country, quarantine is applied for live birds ([Annex 4](#). point 2.5), and products are released for consumption after risk-based laboratory examination.

Information on import and export of the one-day old chickens and poultry products for the period 2023-2024 (first semester) is available under [Annex 7](#).

5.4 Vaccination

Azerbaijan is considered a risky area for HPAI due to the geographical location of the country under the migratory route of migratory birds. Antibodies against the H9 serotype of the bird flu virus were detected in wild and backyard birds during the surveillance conducted in 2021 and 2022. Since 2022, vaccination against low-pathogenic bird flu has been implemented in industrial poultry. Vaccination is carried out under the supervision of AFSA inspectors. A non-vaccinated group of birds (sentinel birds) are kept as a control group in parallel during the vaccination. It is planned to design the continuation of the vaccination campaign in the next years depending on the epizootic situation of HPAI in the region. The requirements of Chapter 10.4.28 of the *Terrestrial Code* and Chapter 3.3.4 of the *Terrestrial Manual* are taken into account when designing vaccination and issuing veterinary certificates during transportation of vaccinated birds and their products.

As the use of HPAI vaccines can reduce viral load in the environment and reduce the spread of the disease while permitting the virus to be present at low levels, the farms where vaccination have been carried out are removed from the general monitoring schedule ([Annex 11](#)) and included in the special monitoring plan. Surveillance is carried out according to the national surveillance program in the non-vaccinated farms and wild birds. After the HPAI vaccination started in 2022, the Contingency plan was also amended accordingly and the plan was re-approved in 2023 as mentioned above.

In 44 large poultry farms in the country were kept 11.1 million birds on average, LPAI vaccination are practised. These farms are mainly located along the migration routes of migratory birds. After vaccination, serological tests are performed to check the level of immunity, and for this purpose, samples are taken from each barn separately. Sampled birds are select randomly within the barn. Samples are taken from the sentinel (control) birds kept in that barn at the same time. Serological monitoring is carried out every breeding cycle in broiler poultry, and twice a year in laying and breeding birds. Information on monitoring are given in the [Annex 13](#).

6. Other consideration

The guidelines of WOA ``Policy brief Avian influenza vaccination: Why it should not be a barrier to safe trade`` dated December 15, 2023 are taken into account when compiling the vaccination program.

7. Conclusion

Considering that in Azerbaijan:

- infection with HPAI viruses is a notifiable disease;
- an ongoing awareness programme is in place to ensure proper notification of suspicions of HPAI in poultry and other captive birds, as well as encourage reporting of suspicions in wild birds from the public;
- measures to prevent the introduction of the infection or infestation are in place;
- surveillance is carried out in accordance with Chapter 1.4 and Articles 10.4.26. to 10.4.30 of the *Terrestrial Code* and there is an early warning system in place for relevant species;
- commodities are imported in accordance with Articles 10.4.7 to 10.4.22;
- there is an action plan that communicates relevant institutions for monitoring the disease, and early detection and rapid response measures are constantly updated;
- there are rules and regulations for the implementation of stamping out, compensation payments, restriction of import and domestic transportation and other necessary measures in case of the diseases;

The WOAHP Delegate of Azerbaijan declares that the country complies with the requirements to self-declare freedom from infection with high pathogenicity avian influenza viruses in poultry as of 01 April 2023, in accordance with Chapters 1.4. and 1.6. and Article 10.4.6. of the *Terrestrial Code* (2024) and consistent with the information provided to WAHIS.