

News focus

Worries over lab animals decision

The move by a British farm raising animals for research to pull out in the face of animal rights activists has caused widespread concern and fears that new legislation to limit their activities may not be working. **Nigel Williams** reports.

The British government and some of the country's leading scientists have reacted with anger and frustration to the decision to end breeding of animals at a farm that has been relentlessly targeted by animal rights protesters, warning that there could be severe consequences for clinical research in the country, in spite of new legislation this year limiting their activities.

The decision by the owners of Darley Oaks farm in Newchurch, Staffordshire follows a six-year campaign, one of several by animal rights activists that have caused growing concern in parliament.

Though Darley Oaks farm's announcement caused jubilation among animal rights activists, the government responded robustly,

condemning the way that many protesters behaved. "It is wholly unacceptable that a small minority of animal extremists should mount a campaign of fear and intimidation in an attempt to stop individuals and companies going about their lawful and legitimate business," a spokesman for the Department of Trade and Industry said.

The chair of the science and technology select committee, Ian Gibson, who was one of the driving forces behind the government's initial decision to act, said the decision showed the government "must now do more" to prevent the protesters.

"This illustrates how we have got to be even more vigilant and prevent this kind of thing happening in the future. People are feeling really victimized and

intimidated. It is completely unacceptable." His view was echoed across the political spectrum. The Conservative MP Michael Fabricant, whose constituency includes the farm, described the protesters as "animal rights terrorists".

"It is a sad day when terror tactics are seen, albeit wrongly, to have succeeded and the rule of law in our country to have failed," he said. Evan Harris, the Liberal Democrat science spokesman, called the news "a victory for terrorism and extremism". "The government must do more to protect the remaining sites where animal breeding and research takes place – it is a lawful, legitimate and valuable activity which is a vital tool in producing new medical treatments," he said. "Animal rights extremists who use violence, intimidation and harassment to further their ends must be shunned and exposed."

Although the government also moved to reassure the scientific community that another supplier would replace Darley Oaks farm, which breeds guinea pigs, the news also prompted fresh fears about research in the UK.

More than 500 UK scientists and clinicians pledged their support for animal testing in research in a document drawn up by the Research Defence Society. They supported a statement stating that a "a small but vital" part of medical research involves animals. The declaration, which is not linked to the Darley Oak's decision, comes 15 years after a similar declaration by the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Simon Festing, executive director of RDS said: "We are delighted to have gathered 500 signatures from top UK academic scientists and doctors in less than one month. It shows the strength and depth of support for humane animal research in this country."

Wherever possible, the statement continues, animal



Scared off: Concern over animal rights activists has led one British farm to halt breeding guinea pigs for research. There was widespread concern in the media and elsewhere that the decision was a victory for animal rights activists.

experiments must be replaced by methods that do not use them, and the number of animals in research must be reduced. "We would rather not use any animals and we try hard to find alternatives," said geneticist Robin Lovell-Badge, of the National Institute for Medical Research in London.

The statement also promises to be more open about animal experimentation, urging research establishments to "provide clear information and promote rational discussion". "We have seen a mood of increased openness amongst researchers over the last

two years," said Festing. "We are building on that and the declaration will help."

The new legislation became law earlier this year but has yet to be fully tested. It aims to crack down on the intimidation of companies involved in animal experimentation, making it an offence to protest outside employees' homes. It also allows activists to be banned from returning to places with the intention of attempting to force people to stop doing things — such as animal experimentation — which are allowed by law.

member states have not followed this stance, as the EU still — in statements issued August 25 — rates the risk of avian flu spreading to its area as 'low'. Nevertheless, it has responded to the possibility by boosting the budget for a surveillance system of migratory birds that has been in place since 2003, providing an extra 2.4 million euros in order to monitor the distribution of potentially dangerous viruses in the wild.

The Commission has also asked the member states for regular updates via the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS). On September 20th, the authorities involved in the EWRS are due to hold a meeting to deal with the risks of avian flu.

All these measures may or may not protect European poultry from the disease and European farmers from economic losses, but they will do nothing to stop the next human influenza pandemic. Experts agree that this is most likely to arise from Asia, no matter how many ducks or chickens are infected in Europe. There are essentially two things that need to be done to limit the damage from a potential human pandemic. Plan A involves confining the outbreak at its source, and plan B needs to be prepared for the likely failure of plan A.

Plan A suffers from all the predictable problems. In countries like Vietnam, the lack of research resources means that an outbreak will be diagnosed too late, and there won't be the necessary medical resources to contain it. While wealthier Asian nations such as Hong Kong have demonstrated rapid and efficient response to outbreaks of avian flu, poorer nations remain vulnerable and will depend on technical and financial help for any measures to intercept a potential flu pandemic at source. The European Commission has already started providing such help to some countries, particularly to Vietnam.

Such help and improvements of the situation in Asia may be able to suppress some, perhaps even many, species crossings that

Bird flu fears heading west

The spread of avian influenza for South East Asia to places as distant as Russia and Finland has prompted the European Union to gear up its response amid the fears that it may spawn a new human influenza pandemic.

Michael Gross reports.

Writer Aldous Huxley died on November 22, 1963, but nobody took any notice, because this was also the day J.F. Kennedy was shot dead. Similarly, the biggest influenza pandemic of the 20th century killed 20 million people in 1918/19, but did not make the top headlines, because there was a World War going on at the same time. To this day, the disease wrongly labelled the Spanish flu has remained a footnote in the history books.

Recently, however, people have been paying somewhat more attention to it. Today, we know that flu epidemics do not come from Spain, but that they arise when avian flu viruses cross the species barrier and by mutation acquire the ability not only to infect humans but also to transmit the infection directly from one person to another. The most likely breeding place for new viruses of this kind is South East Asia, where millions of domestic birds and many millions of people live in close proximity.

In recent years, with human and bird populations continuing to rise, this problem has become

more urgent. Since December 2003, a number of regional outbreaks of the avian flu strain H5N1 in South East Asia have caused serious economic damage and led to over 100 confirmed cases of human infection, resulting in over 50 deaths. Earlier this year, the discovery of infected wild birds in Russia, Kazakhstan and possibly Finland suggested that the autumn migrations might spread the virus to Europe. In this context, the European Union and its member states are faced with two important tasks: containing the spread of influenza in birds to avoid economic damage to the poultry industry, and even more importantly, making viable plans for the day when bird flu turns into a human flu pandemic.

In order to protect the free range chickens on European farms, one has to keep an eye on the wildfowl. Many variants of influenza virus are known to be less dangerous to wild waterfowl than to farmyard turkeys and chickens. If this holds for the variant H5N1, which caused the recent flu outbreaks in Asia, wild animals could spread it to Europe without suffering too much from it themselves.

Following reports of a potential case of avian flu in a seagull in Finland, the Dutch agriculture minister ordered all free-range chickens to be kept indoors until further notice. However, other EU