

New bird flu scare hits holiday hopes of French foie gras exporters

2 December 2016

A new outbreak of bird flu hit France's foie gras producers on Friday just as a ban on exports outside Europe was about to be lifted in time for the crucial holiday period.

The agriculture ministry said the outbreak of the "highly pathogenic" H5N8 strain of the virus was detected Thursday on a duck farm in the southwestern Tarn region, the heart of the lucrative, though controversial, foie gras industry.

Exports outside the European Union had been suspended after an outbreak a year ago, and producers were waiting for the green light—which had been set for Saturday—to resume shipments just in time for the holidays.

Japan, a top export market for foie gras, banned imports from France last December after the H5N1 strain was detected on 69 farms in southwestern France.

As a result of the fresh outbreak, France will be unable to "recover, as anticipated, its status as (a country) free of [bird flu](#)" on Saturday, the ministry said in a statement.

Sales within the EU can continue, however, under the norms of the World Organisation for Animal Health, the ministry said.

It said migratory birds were the likely source of the [outbreak](#), which affected 2,000 of the Tarn farm's 5,000 ducks.

Producers must now wait another three months for the export go-ahead, as long as no further cases are discovered.

All the ducks on the affected farm will be slaughtered, as well as any birds which inspectors deem to be epidemiologically linked to the infected ones.

In addition, a protection zone has been declared within a three-kilometre (two-mile) radius of the farm, as well as a 10-kilometre surveillance zone.

Foie gras has become a battleground between animals rights campaigners and defenders of France's gourmet traditions.

Force-feeding —known as "gavage" in France—of geese and ducks to produce [foie gras](#) (fatty liver) has been banned in several countries but is legal in France.

The process fattens the birds to around four times their natural body weight.

The H5N8 variant of bird flu, which also hit duck farmers in the Netherlands last month, is highly infectious for poultry but poses little danger to humans.

The H5N1 strain, however, has killed more than 420 people, mainly in southeast Asia, since first appearing in 2003.

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