

Statement by
OAS SECRETARY-GENERAL JOSE MIGUEL INZULZA
Innovations in Avian Influenza Preparedness

*Organization of American States
Padilha Vidal Room
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Good morning. Let me begin by welcoming you to the OAS for this seminar on Innovations in Avian Influenza Preparedness. I thank you for your time and personal commitment in enabling this meeting to take place.

As you know, the member states of the Inter-American system place great importance on addressing issues of ecological protection, and identifying complex linkages between environmental change, and effects on human health. I say challenges because we are beginning to grasp the complex and dynamic links between environmental triggers and human health challenges. Last year, the World Health Organization estimated that a one-quarter of all global communicable diseases in developing countries are caused by environmental degradation. For children under the age of five, environmental degradation is responsible for an astonishing one-third of all diseases.

In addition to those long-standing environmental management problems – dirty water and water, exposure to toxic substances that have long been identified as known health risks, the global community is struggling to face new challenges, notably the human health impacts of climate change.

There are some welcome signs that the Inter-American system is working to address environmental-human health linkages. In 2005, together with PAHO, UNEP, the WHO and the Government of Argentina, we supported the second Health and Environment Ministerial Meeting. Last year, the Santa Cruz Ministerial Meeting on Sustainable Development underscored the importance of dialogue, regional cooperation and strengthening the analytical and scientific foundation to keep pace with addressing human health and environmental linkages.

One particular example, and the reason for this morning's seminar, is the 2006 decision of the OAS General Assembly – in its resolution on AVIAN INFLUENZA: INTER-AMERICAN COOPERATION TO MEET A GLOBAL THREAT— that recognizes the potential risk a pandemic due to viruses such as Avian Flu. As a follow-up to that decision, the OAS resolved -- in concert with IICA and PAHO -- to: (1) affirm member states' commitment to work together in combating avian flu (2) identify priority areas for further action and (3) to develop regional pandemic preparedness and response plans.

As we will hear this morning from an outstanding panel of experts, the stark question public health and emergency preparedness authorities are now posing is not -- “Will a Avian Flu outbreak or similar pandemic outbreak occur, but when?”

If Avian Flu were to spread within the Americas -- and to reach for example a small rural community with a small poultry flock -- this would provide the setting for transmission from infected birds to humans. Estimates vary in terms of the total rates of exposure, the demographics of the most vulnerable groups -- which extend beyond the elderly and young children to the entire population -- the logistical challenges in considering very large-scale quarantines -- and the macro-economic shocks associated with responses. Lessons from the outbreak of SARS two years ago provide some insights into the scope of challenges facing public health authorities.

One particular question entails the possible link between risks of outbreaks and global pathways of migratory waterfowl. The OAS Department of Sustainable Development’s work in supporting migratory species provides one very specific avenue to address potential pathways. Surveillance of migratory birds in the Arctic and Antarctic polar flyways has yet to discover migrants carrying the deadly avian flu virus. This should not foster ill placed complacency.

The main pathway very likely will be trade-related, and specifically, possible imports -- legal or perhaps as likely illegal -- importation of poultry that is infected. There are clearly policy questions with regards whether SPS and customs inspection capabilities are sufficiently robust to ensure surveillance and enforcement. I think the recent public concerns about the recall of consumer items such as toys underscores the dilemma all countries are facing in balancing more open trade with robust border protection mechanisms, and I look forward to the views of the panelists in addressing this issue.

Just as urgent, there is a need to ensure that emergency preparedness measures have the information and resources needed to address a pandemic. With these and a range of other very real policy coordination challenges, I am pleased that the OAS continues to work in collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization -- the lead agency on avian flu -- as well as the Inter-American Development Bank, the United States Department of Homeland Security, and scientists in presenting the range of policy challenges associated with addressing avian flu.

Let me therefore welcome once you again, and let me open the floor to your views and suggestions on specific ways to move forward. Let me pass the floor to Scott Vaughan, director of the Department of Sustainable Development, to introduce the panelists for this morning’s meeting. Thank you.