

Bird flu infections spreading in Gelderse Vallei region

‘A bird flu virus circulating in the Gelderse Vallei region would be a disaster scenario,’ said bird flu expert Nancy Beerens from Wageningen Bio-veterinary Research (WBVR) recently in a Dutch newspaper. Shortly afterwards, analysis of bird flu reports in and around Lunteren pointed to farms infecting one another.

On instructions from the government, WBVR is analysing the genetic code of the highly pathogenic H5N1 bird flu virus found on poultry farms. Almost all the earlier outbreaks this season could be traced to separate infections via wild

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birds. But analysis of the recent infections in the Gelderse Vallei region shows a different picture: two clusters of infections, with closely related viruses in each cluster. ‘This

probably means two farms were infected separately by wild birds and then the virus managed to spread to neighbouring farms,’ says Beerens, who heads the Dutch Reference Laboratory for Avian Influenza at WBVR.

Hitching a lift

The disaster scenario is that the bird flu virus travels further from the infected farms. That is why the poultry farms within one kilometre of the outbreaks are being culled as a precautionary measure. Farms in a radius of three kilometres — which is dozens in this poultry-specializing region — are having samples taken by the food safety authority NVWA for analysis by the WBVR lab in Lelystad. That means ‘all hands on deck,’ agrees Beerens. ‘The analyses of the samples have to be ready the next day.’

Beerens fervently hopes they are able to stop the further spread of the virus. ‘The virus can hitch a lift with people, materials, dust particles or rodents, for example. It often remains unclear how the virus was able to spread in a particular case.’ ME