

Reimer Böge

Member of the European Parliament
Committee on Budgets
Committee on International Trade
INTA-Monitoring Group on Central America and Cuba

Annie Schreijer-Pierik

Member of the European Parliament
Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety
Committee on Fisheries
Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

To the kind attention of:

Phil Hogan

European Commissioner on Agriculture and Rural Development

Brussels, 16th of February 2017

Honourable Commissioner,

During the past years, the poultry sector has often been affected by outbreaks of the bird flu. Currently, the ongoing threat of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza virus H5N8 is causing, as you know, major problems for poultry farmers once again. In contrast to previous episodes, the issuing of housing orders by the Member states so far has not been effective in preventing the virus to spread. This is putting many farmers, who have invested in the burgeoning sector of free-range eggs, in a very difficult economic situation. Although they did their best to implement all the necessary biosecurity measures and even though the competent authorities, too, did take all decisions that can reasonably be expected, many are struggling for economic survival. The availability of free-range eggs for consumers in the EU has therefor declined rapidly since the 12-week period for free-range eggs has expired in most member states. In our view, this is a specific situation, which cannot be managed with the ordinary legal instruments.

Although we fully support housing orders in order to protect producers and consumers, we believe that the 12-week-in-house threshold inflexibly to downgrade free-range eggs to barn eggs is disproportionate. The downgrading from free-range to barn eggs is already a big loss with every single egg and in addition, the repackaging and re-labelling of free-range eggs and of products, which contain free-range eggs, cause high costs.

We welcome the fact that the European Commission activated the exceptional market support measures that are available under the CMO. At the same time, we believe that these measures are insufficient to solve the problems with which the producers of free-range eggs are being confronted. Therefore, we regret your decision not to modify the current rule with regard to the 12-week-inhouse threshold in light of the prolonged epidemic.

In order to efficiently support the producers of free-range eggs and to safeguard the investments that have been made during the recent years to develop this sector, , we ask you to make use of article 221 of Regulation 1308/2013 (Measures to resolve specific problems) to issue a derogation allowing

free-range flocks that must be housed for longer than 12 weeks by official order during the continued presence of bird flu to be able to maintain their free-range status for a longer period.

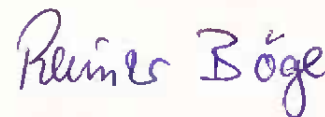
We do recognize the sensitivity of the marketing standards for free range eggs and we agree with you that consumer confidence should not carelessly being put at risk. But at the same time, we need to acknowledge that the current bird flu episode is the worst ever and that the farmers obviously cannot cope with it by just using the ordinary measures. Therefore, it seems justified to uphold the free-range status in the case of such a serious outbreak and when the competent authorities have ordered housing. What's more, such a measure is far more efficient than the current compensation rules, which are furthermore counting against the de-minimis state aid rules and are therefore excluding these farmers from every possibility to receive support for other emergencies under these rules for the next 3 years.

Since the outbreak of the bird flu is a reoccurring phenomenon, we should not only discuss an interim response for the current crisis but also consider long-term solutions. That will be the only way to create a sustainable market for free-range products. However, while the long-term solutions are being examined, we should realise that immediate intervention is needed.

Kind regards,



Annie Schreijer-Pierik
Member of the AGRI committee



Reimer Böge
Member of BUDG committee