



ANTARCTIC TREATY  
CONSULTATIVE MEETING

May 11 - 21, 2026 Hiroshima, Japan

ENG

Agenda Item:	CEP 6a
Presented by:	China, Germany, Italy, Korea (ROK), New Zealand, United States, SCAR, IAATO
Original:	English
Submitted:	25 Mar 2026
Revision:	---

**High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza  
(HPAI) preparedness in the Ross Sea  
region: Ongoing collaboration and  
monitoring in 2025/26**



# High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) preparedness in the Ross Sea region: Ongoing collaboration and monitoring in 2025/26

An Information Paper submitted by China, Germany, Italy, Republic of Korea (ROK),  
New Zealand and the United States, in conjunction with SCAR and IAATO.

## **Summary**

This paper provides an update on how the Ross Sea region partners, COMNAP, IAATO and SCAR worked together to prepare for the potential arrival of High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza (HPAI) in the Ross Sea region in the austral summer season of 2025/26. This includes the results from the active testing undertaken by China, Italy and the Republic of Korea, which have all been negative to date.

## **Background**

To date, there have been no suspected cases of HPAI in wildlife in the Ross Sea region, despite the continued spread of HPAI throughout Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions (see <https://scar.org/library-data/avian-flu>). To prepare for the potential arrival of HPAI, Ross Sea region partners have continued to work in collaboration with COMNAP, IAATO and SCAR to coordinate their prevention, monitoring and response efforts (described fully in IP028 (2025) ATCM 47 – CEP 27). As outlined below, active testing has been undertaken by some of the Ross Sea region National Antarctic Programs (NAPs) and all results have returned negative.

## **Continued collaboration during 2025/26**

A Ross Sea region HPAI WhatsApp group was setup and operational from September 2024, comprising representation from the Ross Sea region NAPs, as well as representation from COMNAP, IAATO and SCAR. The WhatsApp group was used during the austral summer of 2025/26 to share real-time information on monitoring and surveillance results.

Ahead of the 2025/26 season, the Ross Sea region partners and COMNAP also met online to share information on:

- Planned visits to wildlife colonies in the Ross Sea region in 2025/26
- HPAI sampling and testing plans
- Any updates to HPAI guidance, including guidelines developed by National Antarctic Programs
- Communication throughout the season i.e., via the HPAI WhatsApp group



### ***Prevention, monitoring and surveillance in 2025/26***

The NAPs operating in the Ross Sea region have implemented their own prevention and response measures in preparation for HPAI, taking into consideration the COMNAP Guidance on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) Preparedness in Antarctic Operations (as outlined in IP028 (2025) ATCM 47 – CEP 27).

- Between November and December 2025, China collected 231 fresh faecal samples of Adélie penguins (*Pygoscelis adeliae*) within Antarctic Specially Protected Area (ASPA) No. 178, Inexpressible Island and Seaview Bay, Ross Sea. Sampling focused on active breeding colonies, with careful spatial distribution to reduce sampling bias. Sampling protocols were designed to minimize disturbance and were conducted in accordance with ASPA management requirements. Samples were analyzed using validated field-portable real-time fluorescence PCR platforms, allowing for rapid on-site screening. Pooled testing strategies were applied to improve efficiency while maintaining diagnostic sensitivity. All results were negative for avian influenza virus.
- Germany has established an HPAI Task Force to provide guidance for researchers and logistics personnel operating in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, including vessels and research stations. The Task Force prepared comprehensive Guidelines and a Mitigation Plan for HPAI, which were made mandatory for all personnel working under a German permit during the 2024/25 season and continued in 2025/26. Permits issued by the German national competent authority require compliance with all precautions in the guidelines and immediate reporting of any suspected HPAI-related disease or mortality in birds and marine mammals. Germany does not conduct active testing in the Ross Sea region but works closely with Italy to enable testing in case of any observations. Observational monitoring and mandatory reporting contribute to regional situational awareness and support risk management.
- Between November 6 and 20, a scientist from the Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie (IZSVE) was stationed at Mario Zucchelli Station (MZS) and, in collaboration with MZS personnel, carried out field surveys at several penguin colonies located in the Northern Victoria Land. The team examined four Adélie penguin colonies located at Edmonson Point, Adélie Cove, Inexpressible Island, and Cape Adare, as well as one emperor penguin colony at Cape Washington. At each site, the general health conditions of the birds were evaluated, and biological samples were collected from 30 to 50 individuals, including oropharyngeal swabs and blood samples. Upon returning to MZS, the virologist analyzed the swabs using real-time RT-PCR (qRT-PCR) targeting the influenza A virus M gene. In addition, sera were tested for the presence of H5-specific antibodies using a competitive ELISA assay. All oropharyngeal samples from all surveyed colonies tested negative. Consistent with these laboratory findings, no abnormal behavior, clinical signs, or unusual mortality were observed in any of the colonies. These results suggest that during the month of November the H5N1 virus did not circulate in penguin colonies in this sector of Antarctica, confirming data from 2024. Serological testing will be conducted in Italy.
- Republic of Korea disseminated HPAI response guidelines to all Antarctic visitors, research vessel and stations as in the previous season. During the 2025/26 season, Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI) conducted avian influenza virus monitoring based at Jang Bogo Station, taking into account the migration period of birds. Faecal and cloacal swab samples were collected from two penguin species (emperor penguin and Adélie penguin) and Weddell Seal within protected areas of the Ross Sea region and adjacent areas. A total of 59 samples collected from six sites (Cape Hallett, Cape Washington, Cape Roget, Coulman Island, Terra Nova Bay, Wood Bay) were tested using rapid antigen detection kits, and no avian influenza antigens were detected. Considering the possibility of false-negative results due to low viral loads in the initial screening,

additional samples were preserved in viral transport medium (GDL Transport Medium, GDLKOREA) for secondary molecular diagnostic testing to detect avian influenza virus genes. Genetic analyses will be conducted later this year after the samples arrives.

- New Zealand updated its Avian Influenza Guidance ahead of the 2025/26 season to include a response framework and personal protective equipment guide (available here - [HPAI in Antarctica — COMNAP](#)). New Zealand’s monitoring and surveillance programme did not involve active testing for the virus. Rather, Antarctica New Zealand implemented a surveillance programme based on pre-site assessments and periodic observations in the field. In 2025/26, New Zealand personnel visited bird colonies at Cape Royds, Cape Crozier, Cape Bird and Cape Adare. The results of the pre-site assessments (i.e., no suspected signs/symptoms) were shared with the Ross Sea region group via WhatsApp.
- The United States continued its approach to HPAI preparedness and response for the 2025/26 season for field work conducted out of McMurdo Station. Personal protective equipment and dedicated extreme cold weather outerwear was provided to teams working directly with wildlife including penguins and seals. In 2025/26, United States personnel worked at penguin colonies at Cape Royds and Cape Crozier, and on Weddell seals (*Leptonychotes weddellii*) throughout the McMurdo Sound region. No signs of suspected HPAI were observed by U.S. personnel and no active testing for HPAI was conducted.

The Ross Sea region partners will continue to collaborate through the coming seasons in conjunction with COMNAP, IAATO and SCAR, and will continue efforts towards preparedness for the potential arrive of HPAI in the Ross Sea region of Antarctica.