Richard Leach is Head of Sales at leading game feed manufacturer Keepers Choice

Birds, and the coming season

The bird flu outbreak in France continues to cause problems for the industry. Richard Leach of Keepers Choice, looks at what can be done in the future to ensure we don't get caught out

There is no doubt that the ongoing issue of avian influenza in France – one of the worst outbreaks the country has ever seen – and the resulting stop on egg exports from the country has put a huge strain on the UK's shooting sector.

The highly contagious H5N1 strain of the virus has, essentially, seen two sets of responses from media outlets and social media users. The most common reaction has been to sensationalise the situation, serving only to create alarm and clickbait. Headlines suggesting the 'crisis' will result in no shooting this year and hasten the long-predicted downfall of the UK's shooting sector are hardly helpful in the wider scheme of things.

At the other end of the scale – understandably, perhaps, to give reassurance – has been the claim that there is nothing to give rise to undue concern. Citing that annual bird flu outbreaks across Europe have not destroyed the industry; and suggesting a successful UK laying season will see homegrown eggs and chicks come to the rescue are among the reasons given to stem the alarm.

The truth is, neither of these approaches are particularly constructive. What is required during challenging times is an objective and rational assessment, keeping – as much as possible – emotions at bay. The position is clearly of concern; but what can be done? What should we be doing if we aren't getting our birds? And, how can we prevent this situation happening again?

Setting up more infrastructure for breeding birds in the UK will help future-proof our sport

PICTURE: JACK SCRIVENER

This situation is changing all the time, and we would love to hear your thoughts on these issues. Find our details on p30.

Numbers of game

To understand some of the more extreme reactions, it's important to look at the figures. In 2020, GunsOnPegs stated that the shooting industry was worth a staggering £2 billion to the UK's economy – with 163,449 shoot days taking place in an average year. It suggested that £255,000 of this was spent on full and part-time employment, and £81,000 spent on accommodation at local hotels and B&Bs.

With so many jobs at stake, it is clear to see why the aforementioned sensationalised headlines cause so much panic. But what of the number of birds? According to a well-known game farmer that I spoke to recently – who asked to remain anonymous – approximately 26 million of the 40 million birds required for the industry are imported from the Pays de la Loire region of France; the region that has seen the most severe outbreak. In recent months, the region has seen strict restriction and surveillance zones, with dramatic culling on non-breeding stock farms being an unfortunate consequence. Highly regrettably, a leading game farmer has seen 10 million eggs of his would-be stock disposed of due to the export ban.

Clearly, a movement and import ban covering half of the birds we normally import is a problem,

'Whilst a reduction in the number of birds seen on shoots isn't ideal, a non-drastic reduction is likely to see each bird valued a little more'

so anything we can do to prevent this happening again is going to be beneficial in the long-term.

An over-reliance on foreign stock?

An NGO article in *Keeping the Balance* of December 2020 looked at how the Covid-19 pandemic had reinforced the belief that greater self-sufficiency was overdue. The argument was that sourcing from within allowed our industry a greater level of control. And, following this ongoing issue with foreign imports, this point is surely more pertinent than ever.

This argument becomes more relevant still when we account for the European Commission's announcement last summer that a proposed ban on cages for all farmed animals would be attempted by 2023, and possibly implemented in 2027. Not only is it likely that removing this proven system will see a sizeable reduction in the bird stock available, but the cost per bird is very likely to increase, with game farmers and shoot rearers trying to cover themselves whilst transitioning to a very different way of rearing.

With this in mind, as well as the ever-present threat of avian flu, the UK shooting sector would be wise to look at further strengthening its own game farming infrastructure – and perhaps even increasing its output.

The season ahead

For those who have decided to substantially reduce, or miss a year, due to the unpredictable nature of what is going on, there is still much to be done – after all, gamekeepers are still custodians of the countryside.

Due to the impact of COVID on the last two seasons, there are more birds leftover on the ground than usual. These birds need to be provided with water, cover and feed. If running a reduced shoot, feeding residual birds until the start of the season increases the chances of retention, and with the price of birds expected to be at an all-time high, these birds shouldn't be dismissed.

The other thing to consider, particularly for those still unsure on bird numbers, is soil health. A green manuring crop that fixes soil and holds onto nutrients could be particularly beneficial this year as it will keep soil healthy whilst still providing cover for farmland and released birds.

As ever, birds or no birds, I strongly recommend keeping strict biosecurity measures in place and keeping water and pens clean.

In relation to the upcoming shooting season, we do have to face the reality that days will be cancelled due to the lack of birds. The issue relates to EU regulation, which says that stock cannot be exported outside of the EU for 90 days after the lifting of a restriction zone. Therefore, even though restrictions were lifted in France on 1 June, due to the UK being outside of the EU we are unable to receive any stock until 1 September – which as we know is far too late.

Ensuring leftover birds are given cover, water and feed will help retain birds through to the season

The veterinary sector is calling on the UK government to request a special derogation, in which a risk assessment is drawn up and presented to France and Brussels and, if approved, the stock could travel on a specific licence. If dealt with swiftly, this could be a solution to help get more birds into the country.

Whilst a reduction in the number of birds seen on shoots isn't ideal, a non-drastic reduction is likely to see each bird valued a little more by those of us who enjoy the sport. I know that when I make it onto a shoot this coming season, I will feel more privileged, and take more joy, than I would perhaps in a normal year, simply because I am doing something that others might not have been so fortunate to do. ■

The ban on imports of eggs from France has caused far-reaching problems for the UK shooting industry

PICTURES: BRIGHT SEEDS