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First case of bird flu in Europe

MARGARET NEIGHBOUR

FINLAND'S agriculture ministry said yesterday it had found a possible case of bird flu in a seagull in the northern town of Oulu.

If confirmed, it would be the first time the virus has been detected within Europe.

Fears of a global outbreak have risen since the avian virus spread recently from Asia into Siberia, in eastern Russia, and Kazakhstan.

"As a result of a monitoring programme in Finland, we have made an initial finding of a possible bird flu virus in a seagull," the ministry said in a statement. "The studies are ongoing and a final result will come in three weeks."

The European Union, of which Finland is a member, said earlier this week that it believed there was only a remote or low chance of it striking Europe.

But after the spread of the disease into Russia, some experts have warned it could spread to the EU via migratory birds as they move to warmer areas for winter after nesting in Siberia.

Emergency measures have already been put in place in the Netherlands to prevent the infection of poultry, while Germany is also set to introduce new restrictions to guard against the spread of the virus.

Bird flu has killed 62 people in Asia since 2003 and forced the slaughter of millions of fowl. The World Health Organisation has been urging governments to stock up with antiviral drugs.

Finland shares an 800-mile border with Russia to the east and borders Sweden, Norway and the Baltic Sea to its west.

The Finnish ministry said it had been improving disease protection for poultry facilities "systematically over several years".

The import of live birds and poultry products from areas affected by bird flu is banned.

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
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