

The European Commissioner for Public Health
Mr M. Kyprianou
Rue de la Loi 200
B-1049 BRUSSEL

Date: 22 April 2008
Re: Possible invasion of Asian tiger mosquito in North-West Europe
Reference: 2008-056/WvdW

Dear Mr Kyprianou,

The Centre for Agriculture and Environment is an independent foundation aiming at a sustainable agriculture in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Based on this mission, we kindly ask your attention to the possible introduction of the Asian tiger mosquito *Aedes albopictus* in the Netherlands. Since the summer of 2005, the mosquito has been imported from China in association with lucky bamboo plants. It is not infrequently found in, and occasionally outside greenhouses. So far, it has not spread, but it is not unlikely that this will happen soon, perhaps as early as next summer. This implies a serious risk to public health, since the mosquito can transmit several viruses, including those causing dengue and Chikungunya.

We believe that it is still possible to prevent an invasion of the tiger mosquito. This can either be achieved by banning import of lucky bamboo from China or by strict quarantine measures. On 12 February, the Dutch parliament has endorsed a motion requiring the government to implement quarantine on shipments of lucky bamboo. However, the minister of Public Health refuses to impose quarantine and instead relies on a covenant with importers, that in our opinion is inadequate. We therefore kindly request you to take action.

Some facts

First we present some relevant facts:

- The Asian tiger mosquito was introduced in Italy in the 1990s with imports of used tires from East Asia and/or the USA.
- It quickly spread across Italy, where it has become a major nuisance.
- It has invaded the southeast of France, where the government has taken several measures to stop further spread.
- Last summer, the mosquito was involved in an outbreak of a new disease in Europe: Chikungunya. The virus was introduced near Ravenna by an infected traveller from India and was subsequently spread by the tiger mosquito. More than 250 people fell ill, including one fatality.
- In the Netherlands, the mosquito was first observed in the summer of 2005 in greenhouses where lucky bamboo plants imported from China were cultivated.

- The National Institute for Public Health and Environment RIVM advised an import ban on lucky bamboo. Instead, the minister of Public Health agreed a covenant with importers of lucky bamboo. The importers committed themselves to efforts aimed eliminating the introduction of tiger mosquitoes before November 1st, 2008. The mosquito is monitored by using one mosquito trap (Liberty Plus) in each greenhouse. Over time, a reduction in numbers was found, although in August 2007 55 mosquitoes were still found in the trap of one greenhouse. Since October no further mosquitoes were found in the traps in the greenhouses.
- After the Chikungunya outbreak in the summer of 2007, the RIVM once again advised to reconsider the policy but with no apparent result.
- Two series of critical questions were raised by the Dutch parliament, but again without any relevant effect.
- On 12 February, the Dutch parliament endorsed a motion requiring the government to impose quarantine on imported lucky bamboo.
- On 27 March, the minister of Public Health, Ab Klink, decided *not* to carry out the motion for three reasons:
 1. Quarantine would be difficult to implement, given the lack of quarantine facilities.
 2. Quarantine would be ineffective, since dried eggs of the mosquito can survive for a long period of time.
 3. Quarantine would be unnecessary since no mosquitoes were found after October.
- In September 2007 tiger mosquitoes were found near highways in Southern Germany, indicating a new possible invasion route: hitchhiking with cars, caravans and trucks from southern Europe.

Comments

We strongly oppose our minister's policy and don't find his arguments convincing. Quarantine facilities can easily be created. The problem of dried eggs may be more difficult to tackle, but if it is serious, the minister cannot claim his present non-quarantine policy to be successful. Finally, it has been observed several times that tiger mosquitoes were flying around in the greenhouse even though the trap was functioning. Also, on some occasions traps were reported to be defect. Hence the lack of mosquitoes may be due to defect traps rather than less imports. Meanwhile, the mosquitoes have the opportunity to take a blood meal from employees and lay large quantities of eggs in or outside the greenhouse. A recent report concluded that the Dutch climate is not too cold for establishment of the tiger mosquito.

In our opinion urgent action in the Netherlands is required in view of:

- the approach of the summer, when conditions for spreading will be more favourable;
- the outbreak of Chikungunya in Italy during last summer;
- heavy epidemics of dengue in Southeast Asia as well as South America and the Caribbean;
- the fact that once the mosquito has established, it may be hard to eradicate it.

Subsidiarity

Although we realise that the competence of the EU in public health affairs is limited, we feel the Commission has good reasons to put pressure on the Dutch as well as the German and French governments to intensify their efforts to prevent further invasion of the tiger mosquito overland as well as overseas:

- The mosquito is a serious nuisance and can transmit several pathogens.
- The risk of spreading across borders.

- Almost all of the shipments of lucky bamboo from China to Europe arrive in the port of Rotterdam. The containers are transported to greenhouses in the Netherlands, and after further development most of the plants are transported across Europe. Earlier, the ministry of Public Health concluded that it is possible that plants put on the market are infested with the eggs or larvae of tiger mosquitoes. Since the greenhouses in the Netherlands are largely concentrated, it is also possible that other Dutch export products from the greenhouses are infested with tiger mosquitoes.
- The mosquito interferes with the European blood market. For example, the Dutch blood bank Sanquin for several months decided to refuse blood from donors that had recently visited Northern Italy.
- If the Dutch government imposes an import ban on lucky bamboo, exporters may decide to switch to other seaports such as Antwerpen or Hamburg. In that case, the risk would not be eliminated but just be replaced.

In view of the subsidiary principle, the Commission has good reasons to interfere.

Action by European Commission

Given all these considerations, we kindly request you:

1. to put pressure on the Dutch government to stop the introduction of Asian tiger mosquitoes before the next summer. If possible by quarantine, if necessary by a ban on lucky bamboo imports;
2. in the latter case, to put pressure on other EU member states *not* to take over these imports;
3. in case China would challenge an import ban, to firmly stand behind the Netherlands and other member states that may implement such a ban;
4. to consider a EU-wide ban on imports of lucky bamboo and other vehicles for the tiger mosquito until exporters can certify they are free from this mosquito;
5. to support and co-ordinate efforts by France and Germany to prevent further invasion overland.

We hope you share our concerns and look forward to your reply. If you wish to receive more information, please contact us.

For obvious reasons, we send a copy of this letter to the ministers of Public Health of the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia, Germany, France and the UK as well as to the ECDC. We also send a similar letter to the Commissioner for the Environment.

Yours sincerely,

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