https://fyi.org.nz/request/35483-unprecedented-vaccination-of-endangered-native-birds-scientific-assessment-and-decision-making-process

MINISTRY FOR PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

OFFICIAL INFORMATION ACT REQUEST:

Unprecedented Vaccination of Endangered Native Birds: Scientific Assessment and Decision-Making Process

J R BRUNING. SEPTEMBER 17, 2026.

BACKGROUND & REASON FOR THIS REQUEST

This request follows MPI's response of 8 September 2026 to OIA26-0675 concerning the vaccination of threatened native birds against HPAI H5N1.

I am concerned by MPI's decision to refuse the entirety of OIA26-0675 under section 18(f), on the basis that responding would require searching through a large quantity of information and reviewing individual documents.

I emphasise that the earlier request did not ask MPI to conduct new scientific research, reconstruct a risk assessment, or search indiscriminately through all information associated with H5N1.

The request sought the principal existing records upon which MPI relied.

Scientifically, and from a policy and governance perspective, significant decisions are usually distilled into a relatively narrow set of records. Scientific evidence may be extensive, but the evidence relied upon for a particular decision is ordinarily evaluated, summarised or communicated through identifiable assessments, advice, briefings or decision documents.

This should be particularly true here. The programme concerns a defined and unprecedented intervention in core breeding populations of critically endangered species, involving approximately 300 birds from five threatened species, a specific disease threat and a specific vaccine. The decision was made over a relatively short period and would reasonably be expected to involve a relatively small group of senior scientific, veterinary and programme personnel.

It is therefore difficult to understand why MPI would need to review an unspecified mass of information simply to identify the principal scientific assessments and decision records relied upon.

If MPI decided that the risk from H5N1 justified intervening in core breeding populations of critically endangered species, somebody made that decision or recommendation. If the decision was scientifically informed, somebody considered the relevant scientific evidence. There should therefore be a reasonably short and identifiable chain between the scientific evidence, its assessment by the responsible scientific personnel, the advice provided to decision-makers, and the decision to proceed.

My earlier request was deliberately directed towards that chain of reasoning. In a democracy, consequential decisions by public agencies should leave an identifiable record showing the

evidence considered, the reasoning applied, the advice given and who ultimately authorised the decision.

For example, I asked for the principal records showing how the estimated risk from H5N1 was weighed against the known and uncertain risks associated with vaccination, capture, handling, restraint, blood sampling and repeated boosting. I also asked for the principal records identifying the criteria, thresholds or risk-benefit considerations used to determine when the H5N1 threat was sufficient to justify commencement of threatened-species vaccination.

MPI's response does not identify a single such record. Nor does it say whether these assessments exist. Instead, the entire request, including discrete questions concerning MPI's own registered vaccine product and the scientific basis for its use, was refused because the request was said to be "substantial in scope".

What scientific assessment was actually relied upon when MPI participated in the decision to vaccinate these threatened core breeding populations?

If such an assessment exists, it should be identifiable without reviewing every document associated with New Zealand's H5N1 response. If no such assessment is held, please say so.

The published trial cannot, on its own, provide a sufficiently transparent scientific basis for this intervention. It involved very small cohorts, did not undertake viral challenge, used antibody responses as a proxy for protection, and expressly acknowledges that overall efficacy will not be known until natural challenge occurs.

Of particular scientific concern, its principal results are reported as percentages without the underlying numbers tested at each time point, despite deaths, difficulties with recapture, incomplete vaccination and adverse events associated with capture and handling. If these percentages and antibody responses formed a material part of the justification for progressing to vaccination of approximately 300 core breeding birds, the absence of transparent denominators, individual outcomes and accounting for loss to follow-up is deeply concerning.

Without these data, attrition and potential attrition bias cannot be independently assessed, nor can the strength and durability of the observed immune response be adequately evaluated. An antibody response used as a proxy for protection cannot itself establish protection against H5N1 disease or mortality.

I have therefore narrowed this request further, not because the underlying questions are unreasonably broad, but to remove any possible ambiguity about what I am seeking: the small number of principal scientific, advisory and decision records that informed this intervention, and the senior officials responsible for the decision.

1. PRINCIPAL SCIENTIFIC AND DECISION RECORD

DOC has advised in response to OIAD-9589 that information concerning the decision-making and funding matters previously requested is held by MPI.

DOC further advised that, under ordinary circumstances, it would have transferred these aspects of the request to MPI. MPI is therefore not being asked to search for records concerning matters

outside its responsibility: DOC has expressly identified MPI as the agency holding the requested decision-making and funding information.

Please provide the principal existing scientific assessment, briefing, decision paper, recommendation, meeting record or other record that was placed before, prepared for, or relied upon by the person or group responsible for recommending or approving commencement of the 2026 threatened-species vaccination programme.

I am seeking the record or small number of records that best document:

a. the scientific justification for proceeding with vaccination;
b. the assessment of the risk posed by H5N1 to the threatened species concerned;
c. the expected benefit of vaccination relative to its known and uncertain risks;
d. the recommendation or decision to proceed; and
e. the scientific assessment of whether the 2024–2025 trial provided sufficient evidence to support progression from an experimental trial involving small numbers of birds to vaccination of approximately 300 core breeding birds.

If no record held by MPI brings these considerations together, please provide the principal scientific advice and principal decision record separately. If no such scientific assessment or decision record is held, please confirm this.

I am not requesting all correspondence or records relating to the programme, nor asking MPI to reconstruct the decision-making process.

2. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DECISION

Please identify the position/title of the senior MPI official, committee or decision-making group responsible for:

a. providing or endorsing the principal scientific advice supporting commencement of threatened-species vaccination; and

b. approving, recommending or authorising MPI's participation in the programme.

Where these functions were undertaken by different people or groups, please identify each.

This question seeks identification of the responsible decision-making positions or bodies. It does not seek correspondence held by those individuals.

3. AUTHORISATION AND FUNDING

Please provide the principal record authorising MPI's expenditure or financial contribution to the threatened-species vaccination programme.

Where recorded in that document, please identify:

a. the amount authorised or budgeted;
b. the appropriation, programme or funding source;
c. the person or position authorising the expenditure; and
d. the scientific, biosecurity or conservation justification given for that expenditure.

If no single authorisation record exists, please provide the principal record identifying the funding source and the principal record authorising the expenditure.

I do not seek invoices, procurement correspondence, accounting transactions, routine financial administration or a calculation of expenditure incurred to date.

4. SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION PROVIDED BY DOC

Please provide the principal scientific assessment, report, briefing or advice provided by DOC to MPI, or prepared by MPI, concerning the results of the 2024–2025 threatened-species vaccination trial which MPI relied upon when considering or supporting commencement of the 2026 vaccination programme.

In particular, I am seeking the principal record relied upon by MPI concerning the trial's findings on safety, immunogenicity and expected protective efficacy, including any assessment of the limitations of using antibody responses as a proxy for protection against H5N1.

I do not seek all correspondence between DOC and MPI concerning the trial or vaccination programme.