

USDA criticized for its bird flu planning

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An audit by the U.S. Agriculture Department's inspector general finds the department has failed to develop a plan to detect bird flu in poultry and birds.

The audit determined the Department of Agriculture has relied too heavily on voluntary testing by the poultry industry and information from state agriculture departments, The New York Times reported Wednesday.

Agriculture department spokeswoman Hallie Pickhardt, told the Times while the department agrees with the audit, it does not intend to make the voluntary testing mandatory. Instead, Pickhardt says the department will supplement the voluntary testing with its own inspections.

Among other things, the inspector general's audit recommends more testing be conducted in live-bird markets and at illegal auctions of fighting gamecocks, the newspaper said.

In January, the National Chicken Council announced its members would test every flock for influenza two weeks before slaughter.

But poultry experts say if the lethal H5N1 avian flu strain spread to the United States, no testing would be needed to spot it since H5N1 can kill a flock of thousands of birds within 24 hours, the Times reported.

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