

Turkey farms boost precautions after deadly flu strain found

March 6 2015, byKia Farhang

Minnesota turkey farmers are increasing precautionary measures after a highly pathogenic strain of avian influenza wiped out a flock of 15,000 birds in about a week.

Health officials in the country's largest turkey-producing state say the strain is unlikely to infect humans. But it's likely to hurt exports because other countries will be unwilling to take Minnesota birds, and it will have farmers on alert for months, said Steve Olson, executive director of the Minnesota Turkey Growers Association.

Turkey farms already take precautions to prevent outside contaminants from reaching their flocks, such as covering footpaths in disinfectant to kill bacteria and trimming grass regularly to prevent rodents from accessing the birds.

Now, farmers will watch for birds that are lethargic or coughing, Olson said—signs that the H5N2 strain has leapt beyond the unidentified Pope County farm announced Thursday as the first appearance of the strain in the Mississippi flyway, the bird migration route that follows the river.

"What we're concerned about is keeping what's in the barn in the barn and what's out of the barn out of the barn," Olson said.

The virus has also shown up in Idaho, Washington and Oregon. It jumps from wild waterfowl who aren't sickened by it.

Other forms of bird flu have reached Minnesota before, Olson said, but they were mild compared with H5N2. Still, he said, he's "guardedly optimistic" the flu can be contained. "We know what to do to look for the disease and keep the disease out," he said.

In the meantime, however, the virus will also have "a huge impact" on Minnesota's turkey exports, Olson said. About 6 million Minnesota turkeys are sent to international markets every year, roughly 13.5 percent of total production, according to the growers association. Those international exports add up to about \$100 million annually.

Olson said state and federal veterinarians will test turkeys for the infection from roughly 20 "backyard flocks" within a 6-mile radius of the affected site, then sample further out. Backyard flock owners typically don't follow the rigid security protocols that large farms do.

Wild bird migrations to Minnesota typically slow in May, Olson said, which is when the risk of further infection from them could decrease.

"It's a matter now of Minnesotans coming together and testing and monitoring our way out of this," said Carol Cardona, an avian health professor at the University of Minnesota.

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