

New bird flu cases slow, focus turns to preventing repeat

June 12 2015, by David Pitt



This April 20, 2015 file photo shows a sign warning visitors to stay away outside an infected turkey farm in Melrose, Minn. No new bird flu cases have been reported in nearly a week on commercial farms in Minnesota and Iowa and officials are hopeful the worst outbreak in the U.S. is winding down. Farmers are finishing the disposal of turkey and chicken carcasses, disinfecting the barns and preparing to restock with new birds. (Kirsti Marohn/The St. Cloud Times via AP, File)

No new bird flu cases have been reported in nearly a week on

commercial farms in Minnesota and Iowa, giving government officials, scientists and farmers hope that the worst U.S. outbreak of the bird flu is, though not over, winding down.

As such, farms are focused on disposing of the poultry carcasses, disinfecting barns and preparing to restock their flocks. Meanwhile, laboratories continue to intensely study the virus in hopes of developing an effective vaccine, determining how it evaded biosecurity measures and establishing what can be done to prevent a repeat.

Here are some questions and answers about the bird flu:

WHERE DOES THE OUTBREAK STAND?

The frequency of new cases has slowed as temperatures in the Midwest rise—up to 90 degrees in Iowa and 70s and 80s in Minnesota. It follows scientists' predictions that temperatures in the 70s and above would neutralize the H5N2 virus so it would no longer infect birds.

WHICH STATES SAW THE WORST OF IT?

Nationally, 47 million birds died or had to be euthanized. Iowa lost more than 30 million birds, mostly egg-laying chickens, although 1 million turkeys also died. Minnesota lost nearly 9 million birds, mostly turkeys; Nebraska was third with 3.8 million birds, mostly chickens.

IS IT SAFE TO RESTOCK?



In this May 12, 2015 file photo, dead chickens are collected for burial at Rose Acre Farms near Winterset, Iowa. With no new commercial farm bird flu cases reported in nearly a week in Minnesota and Iowa farmers, scientists and government officials are hopeful the worst outbreak of bird flu in the U.S. is winding down. On the farms where the virus killed birds efforts are focused on completing carcass disposal, disinfecting the barns and preparing to restock with new birds. (Rodney White/The Des Moines Register via AP, File)

Other regions of the world have seen bird flu recur year after year, especially in the Netherlands, a major egg producer that's seen various strains each year since 2010. Most U.S. farmers are cautious, yet ready to get back in business.

HOW QUICKLY WILL FARMS RESUME OPERATIONS?

The first turkey barn to be infected in Minnesota said this week it has restocked, and others there are planning to do the same soon.

In Iowa, all infected turkeys have been disposed of and the last of the dead chickens could be removed and disposed of as soon as this weekend, according to Dr. Jack Shere, associate deputy administrator of veterinary services at U.S. Department of Agriculture. But state

Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey said producers are still several weeks away from restocking.

WHEN WILL EGG PRICES COME DOWN?

With about 37 percent of the U.S. egg-laying flock decimated in Iowa alone, prices have doubled on Midwest Grade A eggs from mid-April. They reached a record \$2.60 a dozen this week, but were down to \$2.38 on Friday, according to industry analyst group Urner Barry.

Officials say it could take up to two years to return to normal production, and that prices will remain high this year and fall in 2016, though possibly still above pre-bird flu prices.

WHAT ARE SCIENTISTS LOOKING FOR?

Developing an effective vaccine is key so that there might be a way to stop the virus if it surfaces in commercial flocks again. Researchers also are looking into the makeup of the virus to determine how it survives, moves around and spreads. Wild birds are being closely monitored for any signs of mutation since [bird flu](#) has been known to change over time—sometimes becoming more infectious and capable of jumping to humans.

WILL THE OUTBREAK CHANGE POULTRY FARMING?

Possibly. The USDA is working to organize a gathering of officials from the poultry industry and affected states to discuss and prepare for future worst-case scenarios. At the same time, farmers will look at how they've set up their barns, ventilation systems and biosecurity measures, as well as how they move feed, trucks and personnel.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The highly infectious and contagious H5N2 virus proved that even the best measures to prevent such outbreaks can fail, according to the USDA's Shere, especially when thousands or millions of birds are housed at a single site.

"We have intensive agriculture that makes our food cheaper and that's a good thing," Shere said. "But when a disease such as this comes along the farming practices we use get challenged because of the way we do things."

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