

Precautions, preparations help Pennsylvania brace for potential avian flu threat

June 4 2015, by Chuck Gill



Poultry scientists in the College of Agricultural Sciences don gear before entering a facility at Penn State's Poultry Education and Research Center. Proper biosecurity, including the use of protective overalls, is critical in avoiding the spread of pathogens such as avian flu virus.

Experts aren't sure why Pennsylvania so far has been spared in the outbreak of highly pathogenic H5N2 avian influenza that has caused massive losses to the poultry industry in the Midwest.

But it could be just a matter of time until the virus—which is thought to have originated in Asia and to be spread primarily by migratory birds—shows up in the Keystone State, according to [poultry](#) specialists in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"There are four major flyways for migrating birds in the United States," said Gregory Martin, Penn State Extension poultry educator based in Lancaster County. "There has been at least one avian flu outbreak in [poultry flocks](#) along each of these flyways—except the Atlantic, which includes Pennsylvania. We must prepare as if we expect it to arrive here as well."

Martin and several other Penn State faculty members and extension educators are serving on a statewide avian flu task force chaired by Pennsylvania Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding. The group is developing action plans and procedures related to biosecurity; depopulation and disposal of infected flocks; issues relevant to small or backyard flocks; alternatives for youth poultry exhibitors at county fairs and other shows where live birds have been prohibited; and other concerns.

"These plans are like having a fire extinguisher," Martin said. "You hope you never have to use it, but if you need it, you're awfully glad you have it."

In addition, Penn State's Animal Diagnostic Laboratory, one of three facilities in the Pennsylvania Animal Diagnostic Lab system, routinely tests poultry samples for the presence of avian flu viruses and other disease pathogens. In the past, rapid diagnosis by the lab has enabled the

state to contain avian flu outbreaks and limit costs.

Nationwide, about 45 million birds—most from commercial egg and turkey farms—have died in the current outbreak, either directly from the flu or as part of efforts to destroy infected flocks to prevent the virus' spread. "That represents more than one third of the nation's laying hens," said Martin, who emphasized that [avian flu](#) is not a food-safety issue and that the current strain has not been found to affect human health.

However, the loss of layers has taken a financial toll on [poultry producers](#). In Minnesota alone, lost poultry production so far has been valued at about \$113 million, with the total economic impact nearing \$310 million. In addition, the outbreak has led to sharp increases in the price of eggs, which will affect food processors and consumers. Turkey supplies also have been affected.

"If Pennsylvania can avoid any outbreaks, the state's poultry producers could end up shipping eggs to markets they haven't served before, since other states, such as Iowa, won't be able to," Martin said.

But if an outbreak occurs, he noted, it could be devastating in places such as Lancaster County, which has a larger population of egg-laying hens—about 10.7 million—than any other single county in the United States. Pennsylvania is ranked fourth among states in egg production.

The keys to avoiding such an outbreak are vigilance and biosecurity, according to Martin. "By and large, the state's [poultry industry](#) has mobilized," he said. "They're stepping up biosecurity. In many cases, routine sales calls from industry service personnel have been curtailed, and any unnecessary visitors are being discouraged from entering farms."

Martin recommends that every poultry farm have biosecurity and

emergency response plans. "Because wild birds are a major vector, we're also advising people who raise backyard, free-range or pasture-fed poultry to put their birds under cover."

As a precaution, the state Agriculture Department recently announced a ban on live birds at state-approved county fairs and other events, such as the 2016 Pennsylvania Farm Show. Phillip Clauer, senior instructor in animal science and Penn State Extension poultry specialist, is working with extension educators to provide alternative activities for affected youth poultry exhibitors, such as birdless showmanship contests and quiz bowls.

"I am working with a team to develop posters to distribute to county 4-H programs to post at fairs to educate the public and small poultry producers about avian influenza and why proper biosecurity is important to protect their flocks," Clauer said. "We also are encouraging kids to take part in birdless showmanship events."

He explained that a birdless showmanship contest might require young poultry exhibitors to bring posters containing photos of their birds to the fair and to give talks about their birds, proper care and feeding, and the biosecurity measures they have implemented to avoid disease spread. The judge then would ask questions testing the youths' knowledge.

The best posters entered at the county level can be entered and taken to the state Farm Show as well, said Clauer, who chairs the Farm Show poultry division. "I am in the process of reworking the Farm Show rules to incorporate birdless showmanship."

Although the experience and pride of showing live birds may be lost for these youths, the situation can provide a learning opportunity that can last into adulthood, Clauer stressed. "Avian flu likely will make its way to Pennsylvania," he said. "But even if we are fortunate enough that it

doesn't, those who understand and practice good biosecurity will be less likely to see their flocks affected by diseases, parasites and other health issues."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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