

USDA seeking proposals for production of bird flu vaccine

August 19 2015, by David Pitt

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is preparing to stockpile a bird flu vaccine as the agency plans for a possible return of the virus that led to the destruction of 48 million chickens and turkeys this spring.

Wild birds' northern migration was blamed for the original spread of the H5N2 virus. And while there's no certainty the virus will reappear during southern migration this fall, the USDA plans to increase surveillance to catch any recurrence early and have hundreds of additional workers ready to euthanize infected flocks quickly as a means of avoiding the farm-to-farm spread.

But in case another outbreak gets out of hand, the government wants to acquire a stockpile of vaccines available for delivery within 24 hours, and issued a notice Tuesday that it was accepting bids from animal health companies for vaccine development.

"We want to be prepared if we get in a situation where we believe a vaccination would be a useful adjunct to our eradication efforts," said Dr. T.J. Myers, associate deputy administrator for veterinary services at USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

A vaccine reduces the amount of virus that chickens and turkeys produce and excrete when a flock gets infected, which helps contain the virus, Myers said. No sufficiently effective vaccine has been developed yet, though the USDA has created a prototype seed strain. Companies may use the prototype or create their own that could be mass produced for a

vaccine.

The H5N2 virus swept through turkey and egg-laying hen houses starting in March, affecting 200 farms in 15 states and costing U.S. egg and poultry exporters more than \$380 million for the first half of this year, said the Poultry & Egg Export Council. Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska were hardest hit, and producers are just now starting to restock their birds.

The USDA wants to work with companies capable of producing and storing between 100 million doses to 500 million doses.

But the decision of whether or not to use a vaccine will be made with state agencies and with serious consideration to the impact on trade, Myers said.

"Many trading partners look at vaccination as sort of throwing in the towel, that it's out of control and so they would look at that as an indication that perhaps they need to put trade restrictions on the entire country," he said. "You don't want use of the vaccine to cause more economic harm than it prevents."

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