

Iowa company gets first USDA license for bird flu vaccine (Update)

September 21 2015, byDavid Pitt



In this Aug. 10, 2015 file photo, a flock of young turkeys stand in a barn at the Moline family turkey farm after the Mason, Iowa farm was restocked. Harrisvaccines, an Iowa Company, announced Monday, Sept. 21, 2015 that it has been awarded the first license by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop a bird flu vaccine. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall, File)

The first license to develop a bird flu vaccine has been awarded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a crucial step toward preventing another devastating outbreak like the one that led to the destruction of 48 million chickens and turkeys this spring.

The conditional license given to Ames, Iowa, company Harrisvaccines authorizes it to continue testing the vaccine's effectiveness and stand ready if the USDA gives the order to begin manufacturing. The license does not mean the vaccine has been approved for responding to the bird flu yet.

Here are some questions and answers about what the vaccine licensing means:

WHAT WAS DEVELOPED?

The vaccine targets the H5N2 virus that circulated earlier this year by using the genetic code of the virus to grow it in specialized cells, extract and purify it and formulate it into a vaccine. The company's process, licensed last year by the USDA for the porcine epidemic diarrhea virus that wiped out millions of pigs, eliminates the need to handle live viruses, making the vaccine safer.

Harrisvaccines will be able to update the vaccine quickly if the H5N2 virus mutates, as viruses often do. It's also detectable in poultry as a vaccine, which means trade partners can tell the difference between an infected animal and one that has been vaccinated, possibly preventing some countries from shutting off all U.S. poultry imports during another outbreak.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?

Testing shows a single dose is 95 percent effective in adult hens and 93 percent effective in day-old chicks, Harrisvaccines Vice President Joel Harris said Monday. Testing continues on chickens and turkeys.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Another widespread outbreak could drive chicken, egg and/or turkey costs up higher than they already are. Egg prices more than doubled this year after about 10 percent of the nation's egg-laying chickens were destroyed by the H5N2 outbreak, while some cuts of turkey meat are expensive and in short supply.

WHY IS THE GOVERNMENT INVOLVED?

Vaccine development is part of the USDA's preparation plans should the bird flu virus return this fall as wild birds migrate south. The federal agency began accepting bids for vaccine development last month.

WHY DID THE COMPANY RECEIVE A CONDITIONAL LICENSE?

A conditional license is issued in circumstances where rapid development of a vaccine is necessary, allowing the company to continue research and prepare for rapid production if needed.

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