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Avian Influenza: What You Need to Know, Not Fear

College Park, Md. – More than 33 million birds have been affected by the current outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) sweeping across 20 states from the Pacific Northwest to the Midwest regions of the country. While cases have not been reported on the East Coast, poultry growers and workers on the Delmarva Peninsula should be aware of how HPAI is transmitted and the necessary measures to prevent it.

Although these types of outbreaks do not pose any risk to human health or food safety, the effects are economically devastating to the U.S. poultry industry. A 1983 outbreak of avian influenza in the Mid-Atlantic region cost the federal government more than $62 million to eradicate. Egg, broiler and turkey producers lost nearly $200 million. The current outbreak of HPAI was first detected in a captive gyrfalcon in Washington State and in a backyard poultry flock in Oregon in December 2014. As of mid-May, more than 163 cases have been reported and continue to add up daily with most recent outbreaks affecting commercial egg layer flocks in Iowa and commercial turkey flocks in Minnesota.

Migratory waterfowl (ducks, geese and swans) are the natural reservoirs and serve as carriers for avian influenza viruses. These birds do not get sick from the infection but shed the virus in their feces and contaminate bodies of water such as lakes, rivers and ponds. People and animals or objects that come in contact with infected manure from these birds may then spread the virus to susceptible domestic poultry such as chickens and turkeys.

Because the Atlantic Flyway – a migratory bird route – covers the area from Maine to Florida and cuts directly over Delmarva chicken farms, poultry growers and workers on the Delmarva Peninsula who have contact with live chickens should avoid contact with waterfowl and their manure. More than ever, poultry growers, including backyard flock owners, must practice strict biosecurity measures:

1. **Keep poultry away from wild birds.** Keep all poultry away from areas where they could potentially share an environment with wild birds, particularly waterfowl or shorebirds. Ideally, poultry should be housed indoors.

2. **Don’t let wild birds (or fecal material) into barns.**
   a. Close barn doors at all times.
   b. Consider delaying total cleans of finishing farms until the current HPAI outbreak has been contained. This will prevent accidental introduction of contaminated material onto the farm, will help avoid any damage to thawing driveways and will avoid creation of watering holes for migrating birds.
   c. Do not move equipment into or between barns containing poultry without thorough cleaning and disinfecting, particularly when it is muddy outside.
3. **Nothing should enter a barn unless it’s been properly cleaned and disinfected.**
   Equipment (including parts, loading panels, etc.) should be stored inside so that wild birds (or their droppings) don’t come into contact with it. Avoid driving trucks (such as shavings and delivery trucks) into barns. If that’s not possible, clean and disinfect them thoroughly before entering.

4. **Use barn-specific boots and coveralls.** Keep protective gear in the barn’s entryway and use it each time a person enters the barn. Upon exit, remove the coveralls and boots and leave them in the entryway. They should not be worn outside.

5. **Eliminate standing water to prevent wild waterfowl from gathering on the farm.**

6. **Address feed spills as soon as they occur to avoid attracting wild birds to the farm.**

7. **Eliminate unnecessary farm visits.** Nonessential personnel should not enter the farm.

8. **Report any sick birds or unusual bird deaths** to the Animal Health Program of the Maryland Department of Agriculture: 410-841-5810. To report groups of dead or sick waterfowl, shorebirds or gulls, contact DNR’s Wildlife Section: 1-877-463-6497.

To learn more about avian influenza and how to prevent it, contact the **UME Poultry Extension Team** or consider taking a free online certification course at [http://campus.extension.org/login/index.php](http://campus.extension.org/login/index.php).


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