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Avian Influenza Confirmed in Arkansas Commercial Poultry Flock; Producers Urged to Take Precautions

LITTLE ROCK, AR – Testing has confirmed a case of avian influenza on an Arkansas poultry farm in Madison County that showed increased mortality over the course of several days. Following an investigation by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Livestock and Poultry Division (LPD) in collaboration with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Veterinary Services field operations personnel, the USDA National Veterinary Services Laboratory has confirmed poultry from this farm have tested positive for highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza (HPAI).

Avian influenza is an airborne respiratory virus that spreads easily among chickens through nasal and eye secretions, as well as manure. The virus can be spread in various ways from flock to flock, including by wild birds, through contact with infected poultry, by equipment, and on the clothing and shoes of caretakers.

There is no public health concern, and avian influenza does not affect poultry meat or egg products, which remain safe to eat.

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture and partner agencies, including the USDA, are working to contain the situation. Actions include sampling and quarantining nearby poultry flocks.

“We have taken immediate action to contain this disease and will continue to work with poultry growers, the industry, and our laboratory partners to protect against its spread,” said Arkansas Secretary of Agriculture Wes Ward. “Arkansas poultry is safe to eat, and consumers can be confident in the safety of their food.”

“This finding is the first case of HPAI in commercial poultry in Arkansas since 2015,” said LPD Director Patrick Fisk. “Positive test results were confirmed by the USDA National Veterinary Service Laboratory in Ames, Iowa.”

The detected avian influenza virus is the highly pathogenic H5 type, which is more severe and can cause high mortality in poultry flocks. It is the same strain confirmed in other states and wild birds in the Atlantic flyway.

“The farm is under quarantine to stop the spread of avian influenza to other flocks in the state,” said Arkansas State Veterinarian John Nilz. “The birds on the affected farm were depopulated to prevent the spread of disease and will not enter the food system.”

All poultry flock owners are encouraged to follow the strictest biosecurity on their farms to prevent the spread of the disease. Those steps include:

- Limit, monitor, and record any movement of people, vehicles, or animals on or off your farm.
- Permit only essential workers and vehicles to enter the farm to limit the chances of bringing the virus from an outside source.
- Avoid visiting other poultry farms and any unnecessary travel off the farm.
- Disinfect equipment, vehicles, footwear, and other items that come into contact with flocks.
- Keep your flock away from wild or migratory birds, especially waterfowl.
- Isolate any ill animals and contact your veterinarian.

For more information on avian influenza visit aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/animal-disease-information/avian/avian-influenza/ai and for protecting poultry, visit aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/animal-disease-information/avian/defend-the-flock-program.

Backyard flock owners who have sick or unusual deaths in their flocks should email info@agriculture.arkansas.gov or call (501) 823-1746.

Additional background

Avian influenza (AI) is caused by an influenza type A virus that can infect poultry (such as chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quail, domestic ducks, geese, and guinea fowl) and is carried by free flying waterfowl and wild birds, such as ducks, geese, raptors, and shorebirds. AI viruses are classified by a combination of two groups of proteins: hemagglutinin or “H” proteins, of which there are 16 (H1–H16), and neuraminidase or “N” proteins, of which there are 9 (N1–N9). Many different combinations of “H” and “N” proteins are possible. Each combination is considered a different subtype and can be further broken down into different strains which circulate within flyways/geographic regions. AI viruses are further classified by their pathogenicity (low or high)—the ability of a particular virus strain to produce disease in domestic poultry.

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