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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 11/10/22**

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## **The Arkansas Department of Agriculture Expands Food Animal Disease Surveillance Capacity**

LITTLE ROCK, AR – The Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (VDL) has added the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture’s Tollett Veterinary Diagnostic Lab (Tollett lab) in Fayetteville as a branch lab through the National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN) to enhance the State’s official surveillance programs for diseases that threaten poultry. The Tollett lab’s designation as a branch lab of the Department of Agriculture was approved by NAHLN on November 9, 2022.

The VDL in Little Rock is one of 60 laboratories in the United States that have a cooperative agreement with NAHLN under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). The cooperative agreement authorizes the VDL to participate in official surveillance testing programs associated with animal disease outbreaks such as highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). Participation in NAHLN is a vital component of national preparedness in the agriculture sector.

“Poultry is the largest agricultural commodity in Arkansas accounting for approximately 50 percent of our state’s total agricultural cash receipts. Because a large portion of our poultry production occurs in northwest Arkansas, adding the Fayetteville lab to the Department’s NAHLN certification for HPAI testing will greatly enhance our state’s animal disease response capabilities,” said Wes Ward, Arkansas Secretary of Agriculture.

Although the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture (Division) has operated the Tollett lab in Fayetteville for 14 years, the lab was not previously designated through NAHLN to participate in official surveillance testing programs. The two Arkansas veterinary laboratories will maintain independent administrative and financial status but will share a formal quality management system administered by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s VDL in Little Rock.

“NAHLN certification of the Tollett Lab will improve the Division of Agriculture’s ability to serve the poultry industry in Arkansas and throughout the region,” said Jean-François Meullenet, director of the Division of Agriculture’s Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station. “We appreciate this opportunity to collaborate with the VDL.”

Nathan Slaton, assistant director of the experiment station, said, “We are grateful for the support and assistance from the Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s VDL over the last several months. Without their support, this would not have been possible.”

“Bringing the Tollett lab under the Arkansas Veterinary Diagnostic Lab’s NAHLN certification for HPAI testing is forward thinking and an excellent example of what can be accomplished when state entities and industry work together,” said Marvin Childers, President of The Poultry Federation.

After months of constant surveillance testing of poultry flocks and migratory waterfowl for HPAI, the VDL participated in the federal and state incident command structure when HPAI was confirmed in Arkansas on October 8, 2022. The VDL conducted more than 1,000 tests during the incident. All HPAI quarantine zones established during the recent incident have been released.

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture is dedicated to the development and implementation of policies and programs for Arkansas agriculture and forestry to keep its farmers and ranchers competitive in national and international markets while ensuring safe food, fiber, and forest products for the citizens of the state and nation. Visit [agriculture.arkansas.gov/](https://agriculture.arkansas.gov/).