THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

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MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

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What Poultry Owners Need to Know About Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) has been working with its sister agencies and federal partners to develop an emergency response plan for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Between mid-December 2014 and June 2015, there were several outbreaks of HPAI affecting birds in 21 different states from the West Coast to the Midwest. This strain of HPAI is deadly in poultry, but it has not been found to affect humans.

Due to the mixing of migratory birds from different flyways this summer in Canada, it remains likely that HPAI exposed birds are traveling along the East Coast during the current southern migration. Ongoing, routine testing of wild birds and domestic poultry is being conducted, and to date no HPAI has been found within Massachusetts.

MDAR is seeking to educate poultry owners about the risk this virus poses to their birds in hopes that every precaution will be taken to prevent their flocks from being exposed. Additionally, MDAR wants poultry owners to understand what will happen if their flock becomes infected.

HPAI can infect all types of chickens, turkeys and many other kinds of birds. HPAI can strike suddenly and spread fast. Infected poultry may die within hours. The virus can be spread by contact with infected birds or contaminated materials. Some signs of illness may include:

- Respiratory disease, including coughing, sneezing, and snicking
- Decreased feed consumption
- Decreased egg production or misshapen eggs
- Swollen heads
- Swollen or discolored wattles or combs
- Sudden mortality (flock owners in the previously affected states have reported sudden dramatic mortality increases in their flocks with no other apparent signs)

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There are a few simple steps bird owners can take to try to protect their flocks from avian influenza:

- Wild migratory birds are natural carriers for HPAI. Preventing wild birds from mixing with domestic flocks is essential to disease control. Poultry owners should assure their birds are kept away from wild birds, particularly waterfowl.
- Avoid unnecessary movement of poultry between locations and be aware of the potential to carry HPAI contaminated materials onto properties where birds are kept.
- New birds should be completely isolated for at least one month prior to being added into the flock. Birds that are returning home from fairs or shows should also be isolated from the home flock as if they were new arrivals.

- Limit the number of people that have access to your flock.
- Wear separate dedicated clothing and shoes when working with your birds.
- Do not share equipment with other bird owners without thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting between locations.
- Create a written biosecurity plan by actually writing down the precautions you take. This will allow others to take the same precautions should someone else need to care for your birds.

The USDA takes the threat of HPAI very seriously. Sick birds produce a lot of virus, and quickly putting down infected and exposed birds can drastically reduce the spread of disease. The USDA has set a goal of depopulating any infected flock within 24 hours of virus detection. A program has been established by the USDA to pay flock owners for any animals depopulated as part of the control efforts. This reimbursement does not apply to birds that die of the disease, so it is essential that flock owners notify the Department immediately upon signs of trouble. Owners of fancy or exotic birds should keep receipts and sales records that will help establish the value of the flock. Any unexpected deaths or other signs of illness should be reported immediately to the Division of Animal Health (617-626-1795). Increased numbers of wild bird deaths should be reported to the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (508-389-6300).

Birds, eggs, manure, feathers, bedding and anything else that may have contact with an infected bird has the possibility of spreading the disease. If you conduct other agricultural business that does not involve poultry then you should consider the temporary removal of all poultry from the premises while the current threat exists. Alternatively, all poultry should be housed in an area on the property away from any vehicle traffic or other facilities important to your primary business. Any farms or other agricultural businesses that have free-roaming chickens or other poultry that become infected may be restricted from moving products to market. If the birds are kept contained and separate, this should allow for other products to continue to move off the farm.

An Avian Influenza FAQ was developed by the MA Departments of Agricultural Resources, Public Health, Fish and Game, and Environmental Protection, in conjunction with federal and local partners: http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/cdc/flu/avian-faq.pdf

Additional information can be found on MDAR's Poultry Webpage: http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/agr/animal-health/poultry

We appreciate your attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

Michael Cahill, Director
Division of Animal Health