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Keep Avian Influenza Out of Your Backyard

Scott Beyer, K-State's Poultry Extension specialist, reports that the poultry industry is always on the lookout for highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) and other diseases that could affect birds. Recent news reports are a sign that surveillance efforts to identify and reduce the spread of the disease are effective. Flocks, small and large, chicken and turkey, across the US have tested positive already in 2022. These reports are important reminders for poultry owners to be vigilant on biosecurity practices.

As the name indicates, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza is a very contagious disease that affects birds like chickens, turkeys or geese. It is commonly spread by waterfowl. The virus can spread between birds through contact with an infected bird, or by sharing infected food or water. It's extremely rare for humans or other mammals to contract this disease.

With spring arriving, birds are migrating on flyways along coasts and through the Midwest. Birds go each direction and come together while roosting or at breeding grounds. Birds from other countries mingle at northern and southern parts of the Earth. "They can pick the virus up and bring it with them. It's an age-old challenge; it's been going on forever," Beyer explains.

The national policy on avian influenza is zero tolerance. This translates into immediate action; proven to be a reliable strategy to keep the disease contained. Because of extensive routine testing, Beyer said food products, eggs and chicken for consumption, are not at high risk.

Now is a great time to put final touches on a biosecurity plan. At Kansas State University, which maintains a poultry teaching and research unit, the biosecurity plan calls for staying away from other flocks, not trading animals, keeping feet clean going into facilities, just to name a few protocols.

Backyard and small flock owners should have a plan to keep their birds safe. Be watchful of waterfowl on ponds or other bodies of water, especially geese. Certainly, avoid walking into animal facilities after a jaunt around a pond. Keep feed areas cleaned up and covered, if possible, to reduce wild bird attraction, or limit the amount of time your small flock has access to daily feed.

While newborn chicks are not considered high risk for avian influenza, caution should be taken if flock owners participate in local swaps or auctions. Be on the lookout for birds showing sickness and events should utilize a testing program. Farm stores that feature baby chicks would be another place to use caution if poultry owners are returning home to their own flocks. Avian influenza is a reportable disease, which means once detected, it must be reported to health officials. Producers who suspect a problem should contact their veterinarian.

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