Animal health update from the Office of the Chief Veterinarian: agricultural societies and comingling events hosting birds

Update and information on avian influenza for agricultural societies and comingling events hosting birds (issued September 22, 2022)

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Current situation

On September 17, 2022, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) confirmed the presence of H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in a commercial flock located in the Township of Zorra, Ontario. Since then, three additional outbreaks were reported — two in small flocks and one with a mixture of domestic and wild birds.

Avian influenza (AI) is not a threat to food safety. Ontario poultry and eggs are safe to eat when, as always, proper cooking along with safe and sanitary handling takes places. The risk of transmission to humans is very low. People working with poultry should take additional precautions and are strongly encouraged to follow all public health guidelines and maintain strict biosecurity. If you are concerned about your health or if you develop influenza-like symptoms after working with sick birds, please contact your health care provider.

Recommendation against comingling

Comingling events such as fairs, shows and other gatherings of birds can have a severe impact on the risk of disease spread across the province.

People who raise small flocks or game birds for personal or limited commercial purposes should be aware of the risks of diseases such as AI to their birds. **During an AI outbreak, attending poultry events can significantly increase the risk of spreading diseases**. AI virus can be transmitted from one infected flock to another by movement of infected birds and/or breaches in biosecurity, such as transferring the virus from a contaminated environment to a clean environment via equipment and/or clothing and footwear.

During autumn and spring wild bird migrations, there is an increased risk of AI infection to poultry flocks. Measures taken at this time to improve biosecurity, including avoiding contact with other birds, may reduce the likelihood of exposure to your flock.

It is strongly recommended during high-risk periods for transmission of AI and especially during a disease outbreak – such as the current period – **that owners/operators not commingle birds from different locations and avoid activities such as shows, sales, competitions and swap meets** and/or allow people who have recently been in contact with other birds to enter the housing area or handle birds.

It is also recommended that owners/operators limit adding new birds to your flocks at this time and, if necessary, obtain the vendor's contact and complete background information, including a history of any diseases and vaccinations, in case your birds become sick to allow for traceability to their flock of origin.

Early detection is critical. Should you suspect any signs of health concerns in your flock, contact your veterinarian immediately. Bird owners are legally responsible to notify their veterinarian or the nearest CFIA Animal Health district if there is suspicion of avian influenza in their flock. A list of Poultry Veterinarians can be searched on College of Veterinarians of Ontario's website College of Veterinarians of Ontario.

National cases

Since September 4, 2022, Canada has reported 22 commercial poultry flocks testing positive for HPAI in Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario; these are among the nine provinces that have reported cases of HPAI in domestic poultry to date.

The Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative (CWHC) continues to detect positive HPAI virus in wild birds across the country. As of September 22, 2022, CWHC has reported 1,253 HPAI-positive detections in wild birds in Canada.

Avian influenza overview

AI is a highly contagious viral disease that can infect domestic and wild birds, including:

- chickens
- turkeys
- pheasants
- quail
- ducks
- geese
- pigeons
- psittacines
- guinea fowl

This disease is carried in free-flying waterfowl such as ducks, geese and shorebirds. Infected birds may shed the virus in their feces, thus contaminating the environment. The virus can survive for days in litter, feed, water, soil, dead birds, feathers and on the surface of eggs.

Persistence of the HPAI virus – mainly the H5N1 serotype – indicates that the infection may have widely spread in wild birds and the health risk from this HPAI virus family may now be a year-round threat to domestic poultry and wildlife.

Additional information

OMAFRA

Avian Influenza (gov.on.ca)

CFIA

National Avian Influenza - Wild Positives (arcgis.com)

Fact Sheet - Avian Influenza - Canadian Food Inspection Agency (canada.ca)

CWHC

CWHC-RCSF: Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative - Réseau canadien pour la santé de la faune

USDA APHIS

USDA APHIS | 2022 Confirmations of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Commercial and Backyard Flocks

Bird Cast

Live bird migration map

USGS

Current distribution of HPAI cases across North America