

NEWS RELEASE

Texas Animal Health Commission

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Bird Disease Outbreak Over in Gonzales Area

Animal health officials today announced that an outbreak of the H5N2 strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza (AI) near Gonzales, Texas, has been eradicated, after tests on more than 352 noncommercial flocks did not detect additional infection. For more than five weeks, a task force comprised of veterinarians and animal health inspectors from the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) and U.S. Department of Agriculture's Veterinary Services (USDA-VS) combed the area around Gonzales to locate and test noncommercial flocks, to ensure the contagious poultry virus had not spread from a single infected flock that was detected and depopulated in February. Disease surveillance samples submitted by commercial poultry operators in the area also have tested negative for the virus.

"The disease outbreak near Gonzales began in mid-February. About that time, mild strains of the virus were detected in Delaware, Pennsylvania and New York. Additionally a highly pathogenic strain of AI was detected in Canada. AI outbreaks were in the world's spotlight," said Dr. Max Coats, deputy director for Animal Health Programs for the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), the state's livestock and poultry health regulatory agency.

Dr. Coats said the H5N2 AI strain in Texas, and the milder AI strains detected in the northeast states have not been shown to affect human health or compromise food safety. However, when initial amino acid sequencing tests met the international animal health standard for an AI strain to be classified as highly pathogenic to infected poultry, a number of countries shut the door on shipments of poultry and poultry products from Texas, or, in some cases, the entire country.

"The first priority for the AI task force in Texas was to stop the outbreak, eliminate infected flocks, determine if the disease had spread to other flocks, and ultimately, to conduct sufficient surveillance to confirm that the disease was eradicated. These steps are necessary for Texas to regain its access to foreign markets," he said. "We received outstanding support from the city of Gonzales, where we set up an incident command center for the 50-member joint state and federal task force. Thanks to the cooperation of the poultry industry, flock owners, and the Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory (TVMD), we were able to complete the testing and demonstrate that the disease outbreak has been wiped out."

"On February 21, we depopulated the infected flock of about 6,600 broiler chickens near Gonzales, and within a few days, the premise had been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected, to kill all traces of the virus. In Houston, two bird markets that sell live fowl for on-site slaughter, had received birds from the infected farm. These poultry markets, and three others in Houston were depopulated and also cleaned and disinfected to ensure that disease did not spread," said Dr. Coats.

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Add one/Bird Disease Outbreak Over in Gonzales Area

“Since late February, the TAHC and USDA task force team has tested and retested noncommercial flocks as many as four times within a 10-mile radius around the premise where the infected chickens were housed. In the radius of 10- to 30-miles from the infected premise, noncommercial flocks located near commercial poultry operations were sampled, and all had negative test results,” said Dr. Coats. “In addition, the testing was expanded and accelerated in commercial flocks to provide assurance that commercial flocks are not infected.”

“As an extra biosecurity precaution, the AI task force members did not enter commercial poultry operations. Poultry company veterinarians submitted the necessary blood and swab samples, which were tested at the Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratories in Gonzales and College Station, and, in a few cases, at the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) in Ames, Iowa.”

Dr. Coats said task force members followed strict biosecurity protocols to prevent spreading viruses or bacteria. “Every precaution was taken to avoid the potential of transmitting any disease from one farm to another. The testing crews wore disposable coveralls, head and boot coverings and latex gloves,” he said. “They cleaned and disinfected their truck tires and equipment before entering or exiting a premise, and bagged their ‘dirty’ disposable clothing, head coverings and gloves before leaving a farm.”

“Laboratory test results, epidemiological reports, and good veterinary science provide assurance that this Texas AI infection has been wiped out. We still are working to determine how the infection may have been introduced into the flock, and routine disease surveillance will be continued in commercial poultry flocks,” said Dr. Coats. “Now we must work to have our international trade status reinstated with nearly 40 countries. In late March, the AI task force in Gonzales hosted a scientific delegation from Mexico that evaluated our efforts. USDA trade negotiators will continue to encourage other countries to reopen their borders as soon as possible, to enable international poultry trade to resume.”

“We were very fortunate that this outbreak involved only farm,” said Dr. Coats. “The flock owner acted quickly when he noticed higher than normal death losses. I urge anyone with poultry or livestock also to act quickly if they see unusual signs of illness or death losses. Call the TAHC or your private veterinary practitioner, so samples can be collected and action can be taken to stop a disease outbreak.” A TAHC veterinarian is on call 24 hours a day at 1-800-550-8242 to take reports of potential disease outbreaks.