

NEWS RELEASE

Texas Animal Health Commission

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Animal Health Officials Close Avian Influenza (AI) Command Center in Hopkins County, Texas

After 10 weeks of collecting swabs and blood samples for avian influenza (AI) testing from nearly 400 poultry and fowl flocks in Hopkins County, Texas, the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) has closed its incident command center in Sulphur Springs. TAHC officials say a handful of samples remain to be fully analyzed by the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL), but they are confident that the poultry virus has been eliminated from the area.

“During this outbreak, we depopulated and buried about 48,000 breeding chickens on two commercial farms in mid-May. Birds from the two farms had positive blood tests for the H7N3 strain of AI, but the virus was never isolated by laboratory professionals,” commented Dr. Max Coats, who heads up the field operations for the TAHC, the state’s livestock and poultry health regulatory agency.

“The H7N3 AI virus has not been shown to cause human health problems, and in this instance, we are regarding it as a low-pathogenic strain of the virus, because it did not cause significant death loss among the birds,” he said. “We launched a full-scale response, because the avian influenza virus can change, or mutate, and become more deadly to birds and spread throughout an area. Not only can this disease cause widespread bird losses, but interstate and international trade implications can temporarily hamper the industry’s ability to ship birds and products.”

Dr. Coats explained that the field operations team, which included about 30 TAHC and USDA veterinarians and animal health inspectors, had conducted intensive testing and were ready to declare victory over the outbreak in late June, when a noncommercial flock of 14 birds tested positive on blood tests for H7N3 AI. The small flock was immediately depopulated, and the animal health officials widened their testing area, in accordance with protocols for disease eradication and to satisfy requirements of trading partners.

“The flock owners in the area were most cooperative and understanding of the importance of this disease eradication effort, even though some of the flocks in the Hopkins County area were tested as many as five times,” said Dr. Coats. The field crew worked seven days a week to gather the required samples for laboratory testing at the Texas Veterinary Medical Laboratory in Center, Gonzales and College Station; and at the National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, Iowa.

“We extend our sincere thanks to the community of Sulphur Springs for their outstanding assistance to set up a temporary headquarters for this operation. The TAHC and USDA employees have returned to their regular duty stations, but they remain ready to respond immediately, if another disease outbreak occurs -- whether it is in cattle, sheep, goats, poultry or other species,” he said. He encouraged poultry and livestock owners to report unusual signs of disease or pests to the TAHC’s hotline, which is operational 24 hours a day, at 1-800-550-8242.