

NEWS RELEASE

Texas Animal Health Commission

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Poultry Disease Detected in Gonzales County; Poses No Threat to Humans or Food

Texas animal health officials on Friday, February 20, received laboratory confirmation that a flock of chickens in Gonzales County is positive for avian influenza (AI), a contagious viral respiratory infection of poultry and birds. The officials stress that there is no danger to humans or food from the strain of AI that was confirmed in the flock. The flock is quarantined, and state and federal animal health regulatory personnel are working to contain and eliminate the infection and determine how the disease may have been introduced.

AI, like many other viruses, can present itself in many forms, or strains. The AI strain from the Gonzales County flock is H5N2. The signs of the disease in chickens, indicates this virus is a low-pathogenic strain, meaning it poses no health threat to humans and causes relatively low mortality in chickens. There is no danger in consuming eggs or poultry meat, and that is the most important point, said Dr. Bob Hillman, Texas state veterinarian and executive director of the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC). The TAHC is the states regulatory agency for livestock and poultry health. Whenever AI is detected, we take action, in order to stop the spread of disease, ensure the health of other flocks, and protect our ability to trade poultry products with other countries without any added flock health restrictions.

The AI strain affecting the Gonzales County flock is not the same as the highly-pathogenic (or deadly to bird) strain which has spread this winter to more than 10 Asian countries and sickened about 50 persons who live with or handle live sick birds and poultry, said Dr. Hillman. There are many, many strains of AI, all of which have varying degrees of ability to cause illness in birds. It is rare for any AI strain to cause illness in humans, even to those persons who handle live, sick birds.

In recent weeks, two other strains of low pathogenic AI have been detected in the United States; the H7N2 strain was found in two flocks in Delaware and four of the 35 live chicken markets in northern New Jersey. The low-pathogenic H2N2 strain was detected in a Pennsylvania flock. In Delaware, more than 226 farms have been tested, with no additional infection detected.

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At present, there does not appear to be any connection between the cases on the East Coast and the infected flock in Texas, said Dr. Hillman. Currently, we have a team from the TAHC and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducting disease investigations and tests to determine if other Texas flocks in the area may have been affected, and to find the source of the disease in the infected flock. He explained that the on-site team has several regulatory veterinarians and about a dozen animal health inspectors from the TAHC and Texas office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Good biosecurity practices serve as a barrier against the spread of disease. We are urging poultry and bird owners to ensure they take precautions to prevent the accidental introduction of AI onto a premise. AI virus can be killed easily with a commercial disinfectant or with a solution of three parts bleach and two parts water, Dr. Hillman urged. Typically, AI is transmitted from a sick chicken or bird to a healthy one by respiratory discharge. However, the virus can be passed in bird manure, which can be picked up on boots, shoes, equipment or tires. To avoid the possibility of tracking in viruses to your farm, keep a pair of boots or shoes to wear only on your own premise, or disinfect your footwear before entering the farm.

Boots should be scrubbed with a long-handled brush to scrape off manure, mud or debris, and the bleach or disinfectant will kill viruses, bacteria and parasites. Tires and equipment should also be disinfected before entering a farm where birds or poultry are housed, he pointed out. This is particularly important if items have been on or used at another farm where poultry are kept.

Poultry owners should expect their visitors to follow biosecurity rules, too, said Dr. Hillman. Insist that visitors disinfect their footwear or better yet, provide them with disposable shoe covers, or footwear worn only on your place. If visitors don't want their vehicle tires sprayed with disinfectant, ask them to park outside your gate, or outside the perimeter of the farm.. Right now, because we know there is an infected flock in Texas, we need to work cooperatively to prevent the potential spread of disease.