

NEWS RELEASE

Texas Animal Health Commission

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“Round Two” of Poultry Testing Underway in Hopkins County; First Round of Avian Influenza (AI) Tests “Clean”

Nope. It’s not glamorous work—but it is serious. Even so, observers may smile when two-person teams “dress out” to collect blood and swab samples for a second round of avian influenza (AI) tests on more than 315 noncommercial poultry flocks in Hopkins County, near Sulphur Springs, Texas. The teams, comprised of state and federal animal health personnel, pull on two pairs of disposable “booties” over their shoes, wiggle into ill-proportioned, oversized disposable coveralls (sometimes in white, other times in blue), squeeze into purple rubber gloves, and top off their outfits with an all-purpose, opaque hairnet. And, since every “germ” counts when it comes to preventing potential disease spread, the duo will disinfect equipment before collecting blood samples or swabs from an owner’s chickens, ducks, turkeys, emus or other bird species. Once samples for laboratory testing are obtained, the testing team reverses their biosecurity operation-- bagging and disinfecting their disposable garb, re-cleaning equipment, and spraying their truck tires with a germ-killer before proceeding down the road to the next premise.

“Testing teams from the Texas Animal Health Commission and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have repeated this hot, exhausting and time-consuming routine day after day since late May, as they’ve conducted disease surveillance on 315 noncommercial poultry flocks near Sulphur Springs, about 80 miles east of Dallas. On their first round of tests, all flocks were negative for AI infection,” 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.

The TAHC initiated intensive flock testing in an area encompassing about 300 square miles in Hopkins County after a commercial flock of breeding chickens tested positive May 26 for the H7N3 strain of AI on routine blood tests. Although the commercial flock exhibited no clinical signs of AI, about 24,000 breeder chickens were depopulated and buried on site to protect against the spread of disease. A few days later, a second commercial breeder flock on nearby farm had positive preliminary blood tests, and this flock, also with about 24,000 birds, was depopulated and buried. A task force of about 30 TAHC and US Department of Agriculture field staff combed an area extending 10 miles out, identifying 315 noncommercial flocks and one additional commercial breeder flock for AI testing. All flocks have tested negative for AI.

“Now the two-person testing teams are battling heat and humidity for a second round of testing on all flocks-- standard procedure for ensuring that AI has been eradicated and for regaining international trading status,” said Dr. Coats.

“The Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratories in College Station, Center and Gonzales have been running tests on the thousands of blood and swab samples collected from Hopkins County” explained Dr. Coats. “Samples with inconclusive test results are forwarded to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) in Ames, Iowa, for confirmation. Because the AI virus could not be isolated from the two blood-test positive commercial flocks, and clinical signs of illness were not seen, I am regarding this outbreak as being caused by the “low-pathogenic,” or a less deadly form of the H7N3 strain of AI.”

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Add one/Round Two of Poultry Testing in Hopkins County

Dr. Coats explained that there are many strains of AI, and those most deadly to birds are classified as “highly pathogenic.” Even low-pathogenic forms of AI must be eradicated, as the AI virus can mutate, or ‘shift,’ over time, evolving into deadlier forms of the disease, he said. Despite a complete epidemiological review, the task force has not yet determined how the disease was introduced into the area. However, Dr. Coats said migratory waterfowl are a natural reservoir for the disease, and it is possible that infected birds transited the area and shed the AI virus in droppings or through respiratory discharge.

“Biosecurity is extremely important when dealing with poultry flocks and other birds,” he noted. “Disinfect your boots and put on disposable coveralls or clean clothes before walking into poultry pens or houses. Make sure you’re not bringing in viruses or bacteria on equipment—disinfect tools with bleach and water or a commercial disinfectant. As an added precaution, disinfect vehicle tires before entering your premise, so you don’t ‘haul in’ disease. Ask visitors to park away from your facilities, and if they visit your flock, ensure that they also follow biosecurity measures.”

“We are very hopeful that the AI situation has been contained and eradicated in Hopkins County, but we’ll wait to declare victory until the second round of tests are completed in late June,” said Dr. Coats. “With any luck—and lots of hard work—the field teams will return to their regular duties by early July, and Texas will remain free of AI.”