

NEWS RELEASE

Texas Animal Health Commission

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Intensive Poultry Testing Plan To Ensure Disease Eradication, Help Regain Trade Status

Animal health officials are initiating a targeted disease surveillance plan for poultry flocks in and around Gonzales County to ensure that avian influenza (AI) is eradicated from Texas. A flock of nearly 7,000 broiler chickens were destroyed February 21 after the H5N2 strain of AI was confirmed February 19 in several birds from the flock. The H5N2 AI strain has not been shown to cause human disease or to compromise food safety. It is not the same AI strain that has caused disease and death loss in poultry and disease in some persons in more than 10 Asian countries.

AI is a respiratory disease of birds that usually is transmitted by bird-to-bird contact. However, the virus may be in the feces of infected birds, and the disease can be spread to other sites if equipment, boots, clothing or tires are contaminated with infective manure.

Since mid-February, more than 250 noncommercial and commercial flocks have been tested within a 10-mile radius of the affected farm, and to date, no additional AI infection has been detected, said Dr. Max Coats, deputy director for Animal Health Programs for the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), the states livestock and poultry health regulatory agency. In order to efficiently manage the disease eradication efforts, the TAHC and U.S. Department of Agriculture have established a unified incident command post in Gonzales, and plans are underway to evaluate the flocks within the area by employing a series of tests. The disease surveillance strategy will include testing of commercial and non-commercial poultry and birds within a 30-mile radius around the affected farm, so we can assure trading partners that AI has been eradicated. This action should help us to re-establish our ability to ship poultry meat and poultry products to more than 30 countries as rapidly as possible.

Dr. Coats said the 30-mile disease surveillance area has been divided into three zones around the affected farm. The **affected zone** extends to a five-mile radius around the affected farm, while the **surveillance zone** is a circular band that extends from five to 10 miles from the farm. The third area, referred to as the **buffer zone**, is the largest circular band, incorporating the area 10 to 30 miles beyond the affected farm.

Dr. Coats said the 19 flocks that have a link to the affected farm also will be retested, regardless of where they are located. Tests will be required on birds supplied to live bird markets, where customers select fowl for on-site slaughter and processing. As always, poultry owners are urged to contact the TAHC or USDA at 1-800-550-84242, to report unusual death losses or signs of illness in flocks.

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Add One/Intensive Poultry Testing Plan

Owners of the 39 noncommercial and five commercial flocks within the five-mile **affected zone** may move poultry or eggs only after obtaining a permit from a TAHC or USDA representative, said Dr. Coats. Movement controls during the the period of surveillance evaluation are required in order to regain the poultry industries access to overseas markets.

The flocks in the affected zone will undergo a minimum of four retests, as these birds are the most likely to have been exposed to the AI virus, commented Dr. Coats. Strict biosecurity measures will be utilized to prevent the potential transmission of disease from one farm to another. We don't want anyone to worry when they see testing teams wearing white disposable overalls, hair coverings, rubber gloves and rubber boots. The teams will disinfect equipment, boots and vehicle tires, and sanitize and bag all disposable gear. We urge poultry owners to take similar precautions, and prohibit unnecessary traffic onto farms.

Dr. Coats noted that the testing teams will have proper identification, and will revisit the noncommercial flocks for four consecutive weeks to collect swab samples from the throat and cloaca of the birds. Swabs will be placed in specially pre-prepared test tubes, appropriately packaged and packed for shipping, along with identifying paperwork, to either the Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory in College Station, or the National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, Iowa.

As an additional biosecurity measure, TAHC and USDA personnel will not be collecting the samples in the commercial operations within any of the three disease surveillance zones. Instead, the required blood and swab samples in these facilities will be collected by or under the supervision of the USDA accredited veterinarians employed by the commercial companies, noted Dr. Coats, who explained that commercial flocks participate in an ongoing testing program for diseases, including AI.

Movement permits are not needed in the five- to 10-mile **surveillance zone**, explained Dr. Coats. The 178 noncommercial operations in the surveillance zone will be revisited for swab sample collection during the first week of the plan, and again, approximately 21 days later. There are 35 commercial flocks identified in this zone."

Poultry in the **buffer zone**, which extends 10 to 30 miles from the affected farm, will be subjected to the least amount of testing.

Beginning in about three weeks, we'll be testing noncommercial flocks located within three-tenths of a mile from commercial poultry houses or operations. This one-time targeted testing will be sufficient to determine the health status of these outlying flocks, he said. Dr. Coats said information is still being collected on the commercial poultry house locations and the nearby farms in the newly added buffer zone.

Dr. Coats said international trade regulations stipulate that the surveillance zones be delineated by distance instead of roads or other convenient landmarks to assure uniformity. The map included shows where the zones are located.

Poultry owners within the affected and surveillance zones have been contacted and their flocks tested once, commented Dr. Coats. If we have missed anyone who owns poultry, or if producers have questions, please call the Texas Animal Health Commission at 1-800-550-8242. During the next week or 10 days, we will contact poultry owners in the buffer zone, if they need to have their birds tested.