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Asian Form of Avian Influenza Not Present In the United States, Poultry Industry Says

The U.S. poultry industry said today that the “Asian flu” form of avian influenza does not exist in the United States and that poultry companies and the government are taking the necessary precautions to keep it out and to help limit the possibility of human illness.

“We have never had this particular form of avian influenza in the United States,” said Steve Pretanik, director of science and technology for the National Chicken Council, referring to the type of H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza that has killed millions of head of poultry in Asia or caused them to be destroyed. Approximately 116 human beings in Southeast Asia have also contracted the illness from direct contact with diseased animals. Scientists say the virus has not acquired the ability to move easily from human to human.

Several firewalls exist to protect U.S. flocks from the Asian form (called “type Z”) of H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza. They include:

- The United States has never imported poultry products from Southeast Asia, and since the Asian flu crisis erupted, the U.S. government has also prohibited the importation of live birds or other potential carriers of avian influenza.
- Scientists are routinely checking migratory birds in Alaska and along the West Coast to look for signs that wild birds might carry the virus to the U.S. More than 12,000 samples have been collected, with no indication that avian influenza is moving via that route.
- Human beings are considered a possible vector, and the industry has adopted a policy identical to that of the U.S. government, that no one who has been to an area where the “Asian flu” is present should set foot on a U.S. poultry farm for at least seven days after his or her return to the country. In case a person is inadvertently carrying the virus on his shoes or clothing, the virus will die during that period.

(more)

Avian Influenza

Page 2

Conditions in the United States poultry industry are also radically different from those in Asia, where millions of chickens, ducks, and other poultry live in close conjunction with swine and other livestock and with human beings. Chickens are often allowed to roam at large in the villages that dot the countryside. Live birds are sold by the millions in markets in big cities, where they can infect each other and possibly infect human beings.

By contrast, the vast majority of chickens and turkeys in the United States are raised in sheltered conditions where they have no contact with other animals and very little contact with humans. Few human beings in the United States ever encounter a live chicken or turkey. Therefore the opportunities for transmission of any virus from poultry to humans are limited.

The United States has not had a major outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza since 1983-84, when about four million broilers and 11 million laying hens died or were destroyed in an outbreak centered on Pennsylvania. The strain was H5N2 and there were no human health implications.

Milder forms of the disease occur occasionally in the United States and in other countries. The U.S. poultry industry has strict biosecurity practices in place to ensure the health and well being of the birds and employees. While milder forms of the disease have occurred in the United States, it is not endemic in commercial poultry. When an outbreak occurs, the poultry industry works cooperatively with federal, state and local authorities to contain and eradicate the disease. The U.S. poultry industry is committed to a policy of eradicating any outbreak in the H5 or H7 categories by destroying the flocks or through controlled slaughter in keeping with the recommendations of the World Organization for Animal Health. Prompt eradication of any outbreak will help deny the virus the chance to mutate into more virulent forms.

“This is a health issue, not a food safety issue,” said Michael Rybolt, NTF’s manager of scientific and regulatory affairs. “There is no danger of acquiring avian influenza from normally and properly cooked food. Avian influenza is caused by a virus. Like all types of viruses, it is destroyed by the heat of normal cooking.”

The National Chicken Council represents integrated chicken producer-processors, the companies that produce, process and market chickens. Member companies of NCC account for approximately 95 percent of the chicken sold in the United States.

The National Turkey Federation is the advocate for all segments of the U.S. turkey industry, providing services and conducting activities, which increase demand for its members¹ products and protect and enhance the ability to effectively and profitably provide wholesome, high quality, nutritious turkey products.

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