

Avian Influenza and Wild Turkeys

Since December 2014, USDA has confirmed several cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5 in the Pacific, Central, and Mississippi flyways (or migratory bird paths).

Animal Impacts

Currently (6/2/15) there are 201 infections resulting in the death of 44,671,073 domestic chickens and turkeys nationwide. It remains unknown how the disease is being transmitted from farm-to-farm given the high levels of biosecurity in place at facilities.

- Minnesota - 95 cases – 8,262,260 birds
- Wisconsin – 10 cases – 1,950,733 birds
- Iowa – 65 cases – 29,112,500 birds
- Missouri – 3 cases – 29,470 birds
- Nebraska – 3 cases - 3,794,100 birds
- South Dakota – 9 cases – 1,116,200 birds
- North Dakota – 2 cases – 111,500 birds
- Montana – 1 case – 40 birds
- Kansas – 1 case – 10 birds
- Arkansas – 1 case – 40,020 birds
- Oregon – 2 cases, 200 birds
- California – 2 cases – 247,300 birds
- Washington – 5 cases – 6.710 birds
- Idaho – 1 case – 30 birds

The disease has been found in captive and free-range wild birds.

- Five captive falcons and owls
- 66 wild waterfowl, primarily in the Pacific Flyway, but some in KS, MO and KY
- 7 wild raptors, including a cooper's hawk in MN and a snowy owl in WI

Many of the smaller cases involved backyard fowl and pet birds. Some of the recommendations under “Human Impacts” are designed to also protect pet birds and poultry. The MN Board of Animal Health has cancelled all poultry exhibits at state and county fairs this year.

Human Impacts

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers the risk to people from these HPAI H5 infections to be low. No human cases of these HPAI H5 viruses have been detected in the United States, Canada, or internationally. Humans cannot contract avian influenza from handling infected birds or from eating the meat of infected birds. Nonetheless the Minnesota DNR issued the following warning:

- Do not harvest or handle wild birds that are obviously sick or found dead.

- Dress your game birds in the field whenever possible. Wear rubber gloves when cleaning game.
- Use dedicated tools for cleaning game, whether in the field or at home. Do not use those tools around your poultry or pet birds.
- Double bag the offal and feathers. Tie the inner bag, and be sure to take off your rubber gloves and leave them in the outer bag before tying it closed. Place the bag in a trash can that poultry and pet birds cannot access. This trash can should also be secured against access by children, pets or other animals.
- Wash hands with soap and water immediately after handling game. If soap and water are not available, use alcohol wipes.
- Wash all tools and work surfaces with soap and water. Then, disinfect them. Do not eat, drink or smoke while cleaning game.
- If you clean a bird at home, keep a separate pair of shoes to wear only in your game cleaning area. If this is not possible, wear rubber footwear and clean/disinfect your shoes before entering or leaving the area.
- Avoid cross-contamination. Keep uncooked game away from other foods.
- Cook game meat thoroughly. Poultry should reach an internal temperature of 165 degrees F to kill disease organisms and parasites

Wild Turkey Monitoring

It is possible for wild turkeys to contract the disease, but the risk is considered low, and any outbreaks would be small and localized. Disease transmission is fecal to oral, although it can be transmitted airborne in hot, crowded poultry barns. The virus can only survive exposure to UV light for short periods so it would not persist long in nature.

The Minnesota DNR had a three-pronged approach to HPAI surveillance:

1. Collect 3,000 waterfowl fecal samples throughout Minnesota;
2. Ask successful turkey hunters from Kandiyohi, Pope, Meeker, Swift and Stearns counties to submit their harvested bird for testing, with a goal of collecting 300 samples;
3. Collect dead birds of various species reported by the public.

They only collected 75 turkey samples, but all tested negative. So far 68 dead birds were submitted for testing, and the only positive was a Coopers hawk from the Iowa border.

Wisconsin DNR also asked hunters to report any dead or sick turkeys and raptors found during the spring season. So far four were submitted for testing but all were negative. Three dead birds were found under a roost, but they were too decomposed to submit. They likely died from a lightning strike.

Conclusion

While the HPAI H5 influenza has had a devastating effect upon the poultry industry in the upper Great Lakes region, it has had no discernable impact on wild turkey populations, or hunters.