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Western bird-flu strain threatening Ohio poultry Lethal bird-flu strain more virulent than any previous threat to Ohio chicken, turkey flocks

INDUSTRY OVERVIEW

Egg production

2014 (in billions)

116

7

1552

1. Iowa 16.4
 2. Ohio 8.7
 3. Indiana 7.7
 4. Pennsylvania 7.5
- U.S. 100

Egg-laying chickens

2014 (in millions; average on hand)

1. Iowa 59.1
 2. Ohio 30.6
 3. Indiana 27.4
 4. Pennsylvania 25.5
- U.S. 361

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

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By **JD Malone**

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There are about four chickens to every person in Ohio. Those chickens lay more than 8 billion eggs a year, the second-largest total of any state in the nation.

That's a whole lot to worry about as a new lethal bird flu marches this way.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture identified an avian influenza dubbed H5N2 late last year on the West Coast.

Migratory birds appear to be a vector for the flu strain and aided its spread through Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah and Idaho. The flu then jumped from western "flyways" to the Mississippi flyway, a migratory path across a broad swath of South and Central America, the Plains and Midwest states in the U.S. and on into Canada.

This flu moved from wild birds to commercial flocks of turkeys in Arkansas, California, Minnesota, Missouri and South Dakota as well as backyard flocks of chickens or mixed poultry in Idaho, Kansas, Oregon and Washington.

As of early April, it has yet to be found in Ohio.

"The flyways kind of crisscross," said Mohamed El-Gazzar, assistant professor and poultry extension veterinarian at Ohio State University. "It could be here anytime."

It should be noted that this avian flu has not been linked to any human illness, and it is a low risk for infecting humans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

However, H5N2 is lethal to birds and is considered highly contagious.

"This particular strain is quite concerning," said Jim Chakeres, executive vice president of the Ohio Poultry Association. "In turkey flocks that have experienced this, there is a high death loss."

Deaths in infected flocks can be as high as 90 percent, El-Gazzar said. The flu acts quickly, often sweeping through a flock before the birds exhibit symptoms, he added.



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Turkeys are especially susceptible to the H5N2 virus. If it gets into flocks, it could "wreak economic terror," one veterinarian said.

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Ohio has never dealt with anything like this avian flu, said Tim Barman, a longtime veterinarian and head vet for Cooper Farms in Fort Recovery. A total of 5 million turkeys are raised at Cooper Farms each year. The farm provided the turkeys that President Barack Obama pardoned this past Thanksgiving.

“We’ve never seen a high pathological avian influenza,” Barman said, “and hopefully we never will.”

The impact of an outbreak would be severe. The Ohio poultry industry — including chicken eggs and meat plus turkeys — is valued at \$1 billion.

Awareness of the spread of the flu is heightened for Barman because turkey producers have been hit in other states.

“The turkey is probably the most susceptible to this virus,” he said. “It’s very worrisome for everybody. If it in that area.”

Because of mandatory quarantines and the time needed to recover and sanitize after an outbreak.

Ohio’s hog farmers battled a similar disease last year. A virus known as PEDv killed millions of piglets across many states, including Ohio. Pork prices rose to record highs. After a lot of effort to minimize spread of the virus, PEDv has not broken out this year, easing the price and supply of pork.

The price of chicken has not substantially changed since the flu was first detected in the U.S.

Unlike PEDv, which mostly killed infant hogs, this bird flu is fatal for adult animals, El-Gazzar said. Other similarities to PEDv include a lack of current treatment or vaccine options. Biosecurity is the only means of protection for commercial and backyard flocks.

“We have in place in Ohio very strict biosecurity,” Chakeres said. “With that, the farms are very guarded in terms of access, vehicle traffic, and now it becomes even more heightened to protect the birds.”

In practical terms, those security measures start with vehicles, which are washed before coming onto a property. Clothes are changed before coming into contact with birds, and boots are checked and rechecked for contaminants. Goose droppings, which can be omnipresent at times during seasonal migrations, are a prime vehicle for flu transmission, Barman said.

“We’re just working on keeping it out,” he said. “It is the only preventive measure that we have.”

The Ohio Department of Agriculture recommends that anyone with chickens avoid contact with wild birds and change clothes and footwear before handling their birds. Contact between wild birds and contained flocks should be avoided.

Efforts in other states have isolated outbreaks so far.

Birds that travel to industry shows and events such as state fairs this spring should be quarantined for 21 days after returning home, said Tony Forshey, Ohio’s state veterinarian. The state also has detailed emergency plans in case bird flu arrives.

The next several months will be spent waiting.

“Spring migration (of potentially disease-carrying birds) will be with us for some time,” El-Gazzar said. “It will be months before we have any idea.”

Flocks throughout Ohio are routinely tested for influenza, and that will continue. The Ohio Department of Agriculture also has a hotline for people to report sick or dead birds: 614-728-6220 or 1-866-536-7593.

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