

If you've read the news or watched TV lately you know avian influenza is grabbing a lot of headlines. As public concern about avian influenza increases, it is important to know the facts.

As of now, the highly pathogenic strain of H5N1 avian influenza that is spreading in parts of Asia, Europe and Africa does not pose a heightened health risk to either wildlife or people in the United States. Still, the potential does exist for wild migratory birds to carry this virus to North America, and we have a responsibility to prepare accordingly.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) is a bird disease. Although the virus has rarely infected humans, most cases have resulted from extensive contact with infected poultry or surfaces contaminated with secretions/excretions from infected poultry. At the present time, the risk of HPAI transmission from wild birds to humans is low. That said, common-sense hygiene practices are always appropriate. The U.S. Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center, in cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control, has developed and posted guidelines for the safe handling of wild birds at:

http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/publications/wildlife_health_bulletins/WHB_05_03.jsp.

In March, former Interior Secretary Norton announced the completion of an Interagency Strategic Plan for early detection of HPAI through surveillance of wild birds. The plan establishes national priorities and standard protocols for monitoring wild birds. The Service's priority in 2006 is to establish an effective surveillance system in Alaska, elsewhere in the Pacific Flyway and the Pacific Islands. In accordance with the President's request, Congress has provided us with a supplemental FY 2006 appropriation of \$7.4 million to get this done. Collectively, Interior agencies, USDA and State cooperators plan to collect 75,000 to 100,000 samples from wild birds in 2006.

The flyway councils are in the process of stepping down the Federal interagency strategic plan for application within each flyway. We expect most States to further step down those flyway plans to identify specifically where and when the sampling should occur and what entities will do the work. Alaska is leading the way, and our folks are working with USGS, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Native Alaskan organizations and others to sample more than 12,000 birds this spring, summer and fall.

We also have assembled a Directorate-level Ad Hoc Working Group on HPAI, which is preparing a comprehensive plan for Service preparedness and response in the event of an outbreak of HPAI in wild migratory birds. This plan will include guidance on employee safety, as well as internal and external communications strategies and actions that different programs and offices should take in the event of an outbreak.

For additional information on avian influenza, including information on public health and food safety, visit the following Web sites:

- U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC), Avian Influenza Site
http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease_information/avian_influenza/index.jsp
- Homeland Security Council's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza
www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/nspi.pdf
- Interagency Strategic Plan
www.doi.gov/issues/birdflu_strategicplan.pdf
- <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>
- www.usda.gov/birdflu
- USDA APHIS Avian Influenza Site: Biosecurity for the Birds
<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/hpai.html>

Thanks for helping us safeguard the public health and the wildlife we care about.

H. Dale Hall,
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service