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BUSINESS

U.S. Readies for a Return of Bird Flu

Steps under way to combat poultry farm outbreaks during fall migration



U.S. poultry farms, including Muddy Pond in Barnesville, Ga., are taking precautionary measures. *PHOTO: MELISSA GOLDEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By KELSEY GEE

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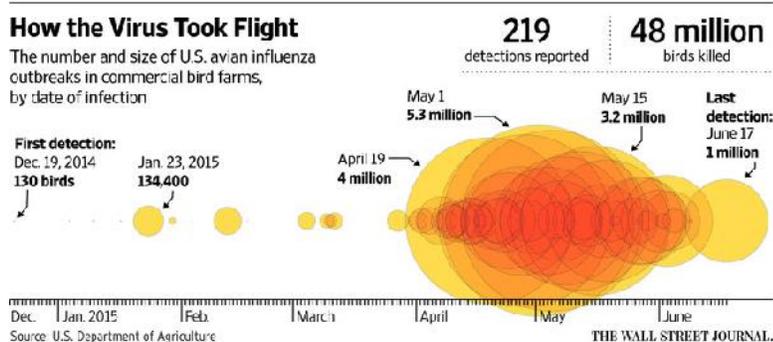
U.S. poultry companies and regulators are taking unprecedented steps to combat the potential return of an avian-influenza virus that roiled egg and turkey farmers earlier this year and killed more than 48 million birds.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, bracing for a return of the virus during autumn migration season, is hiring hundreds of veterinarians and other temporary workers to help respond to the threat. USDA also is weighing its first use of bird-flu vaccines, and states are ramping up employee training and readying equipment to compost dead chickens.

Poultry giants including Perdue Farms Inc., Tyson Foods Inc. and Cargill Inc. are redoubling safeguards such as barring outside visitors to barns and farms. Animal-health companies and farm-equipment makers are ramping up production of tools to quickly euthanize flocks and decontaminate barns.

“We have every reason to believe we could see an outbreak of some sort this fall as wild birds come back through the middle of the U.S.,” said Bill Northey, Iowa’s agriculture secretary. The state was the top U.S. egg producer before half its roughly 60 million egg-laying hens were wiped out this spring in the nation’s worst outbreak of avian influenza.

The highly infectious H5N2 strain led to retail prices for eggs more than doubling and sent turkey prices to record highs earlier this year. It also has cost taxpayers nearly \$1 billion in cleanup, preparation costs and indemnity payouts to farmers—much of it from emergency federal funds tapped by the USDA’s animal-and-plant health service.



Researchers said the virus likely spread through the droppings of wild ducks and geese as they migrated to the upper Midwest, but that inadequate biosecurity and cleaning practices probably contributed to outbreaks. Federal

agencies say there is little human-health risk and no human infections have been identified so far.

USDA and industry officials are preparing to handle an outbreak on more than 500 farms—a worst-case scenario identified by federal forecasting models that is twice the scale of the spring outbreak. The agency and state natural-resources departments have begun using swabs to test 41,000 samples from wild fowl, seeking to quickly identify infections.

‘We cannot live with highly pathogenic avian influenza circulating in poultry in the U.S. ’

—T.J. Myers, USDA

The efforts reflect a shift in how the U.S. prepares and responds to animal-health crises. This summer, farmers and some members of Congress claimed slow USDA responses to outbreaks may have heightened the amount of virus in the environment and made it more difficult for farms to resume operations.

The agency said it is better-prepared to meet its goal to exterminate birds within 24 hours of a diagnosis to prevent further spread of the virus. That process took a few days in some cases this spring.

USDA officials may allow farmers to shut down ventilation in their barns to cull poultry if other methods—such as coating live birds with a firefighting-type foam that asphyxiates them—can’t be done quickly enough to meet the 24-hour goal.

The agency learned it “needs to be able to respond more quickly” and needed more resources, said Dr. T.J. Myers, a USDA veterinary-services official.

The department has hired around 200 of a planned 350 additional veterinarians, animal-health technicians and other workers to handle administrative duties required during emergencies.

Georgia, the biggest U.S. chicken producer, has trained more than a third of its 520 agriculture-department employees to respond to a new bird-flu outbreak, said Commissioner Gary Black. “We’re treating this as if it were a tornado warning, not just a tornado watch, as if the virus is a storm on the horizon,” he said.



Housing manager Dan Roberts inspects two-week-old broilers in a chicken house at Muddy Pond Poultry, a Perdue affiliate, in Barnesville, Ga. *PHOTO: MELISSA GOLDEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The USDA also is evaluating how and when to deploy a vaccine for the H5N2 strain. In August, it solicited proposals for a contract worth at least \$6 million for 500 million vaccine doses to be stockpiled for autumn and used if authorized by the chief U.S. veterinarian.

Iowa-based Harrisvaccines Inc. last month received conditional USDA approval for its vaccine. Companies including Zoetis Inc. and France's Ceva Santé Animale have expressed interest in making a vaccine.



Two-week-old chicks at Muddy Pond Farms. *PHOTO: MELISSA GOLDEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The poultry industry is divided about such a treatment. The hard-hit egg and turkey sectors favor vaccination, while chicken processors worry it could trigger more import bans because some buyers bar shipments from countries with vaccine programs on the grounds that some screening tools can't distinguish between vaccinated and infected birds.

Companies afflicted by bird flu over the spring have bolstered defenses.

"I probably spend over \$100,000 per month on truck washing" now, said Marcus Rust, chief executive of Indiana-based Rose Acre Farms, a major egg producer.

"We cannot live with highly pathogenic avian influenza circulating in poultry in the U.S., it is too great a risk," said the USDA's Mr. Myers.

Tyson Foods, the biggest U.S. chicken processor by sales, is limiting visits to its growers' farms and training some employees in how to manage sick or dead birds without further spreading the disease. The Springdale, Ark., company, whose chicken operations weren't affected by the spring outbreak, also created new requirements for farm footwear to prevent potential tracking of the virus into poultry houses.

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