Wilson County Agricultural Article from Ruth Correll, Agricultural Extension Agent

Poultry Owners - Don’t Be Caught Off-Guard by Avian Flu

What has happened to price of eggs and the price of chicken on the grocer’s shelf? Prices are at record highs and rising. A person in the grocery remarked to me this past week that she had never paid so much for eggs. Prices on that day averaged $3.00 or more per dozen.

The answer to the question of why prices are so high is due to an animal health outbreak. The ongoing highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5 outbreak has been devastating to the U.S. poultry industry and is one of the most costly national animal health disasters on record. Nearly 50 million birds have been affected and USDA response efforts alone have costs more than $400 million.

Since December 2014, USDA has confirmed HPAI H5 in the Pacific, Central and Mississippi flyways. The disease has been found in wild birds, backyard flocks and commercial poultry flocks. To date, 21 states have been affected including Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa being heavily impacted and declaring a state of emergency. At this time, HPAI still has not been detected in Tennessee. It has been detected as close as Arkansas, Illinois and Missouri.

In Minnesota, the number of lost turkeys represent about 11 percent of the total turkey production. Approximately 32 percent of their layers have been affected by this. Iowa has lost more than 29 million birds. About 40 percent of the state’s egg-laying chickens and 11 percent of its turkeys have been impacted.

There are many different strains of bird flu that cause varying degrees of illness in birds. The most common types of bird flu are low pathogenic strains routinely detected in wild birds and cause little concern. Highly pathogenic strains of bird flu are of greater concern because they are easily spread among birds and are typically deadly to some bird species, especially poultry.

Migratory birds appear to be the main harbinger of the virus, so there is a strong chance for recurrence and spread of the disease in the fall as waterfowl migrate south. Transmission from infected birds to well birds is through infected saliva, nasal secretions, and feces.

Wilson County has no commercial poultry production but has many backyard flocks. Poultry owners should implement sound biosecurity practices regardless of the size of their flocks. "Biosecurity" may not be a common household word, but, for poultry and bird owners it can spell the difference between health and disease. Practicing biosecurity can help keep disease away from your farm, and keep your birds healthy. The following are some recommendations from the USDA.

Isolate your birds from visitors and other birds. Try to avoid taking birds to (or bringing birds home from) all shows and exhibits. If new birds are introduced onto your farm, keep the new birds separate from your flock for one month and look for any signs of disease. Always feed and care for your flock first, then care for the new birds. Do not go back to your flock after working with the new birds unless you put on clean coverall and boots. Wash your hands between the two groups.
All avian species can carry diseases such as avian influenza. All flocks should be fenced or confined, in order to avoid contact with any wild birds, especially waterfowl. Do not let wild waterfowl overwinter on your farm ponds.

Introduce new stock only from sources you know and trust to be disease free. Watch the new birds closely for signs of disease before putting them with your flock.

Trips to the feed store mean driving your vehicle and walking around in areas where other bird growers have been. Upon returning, wash your vehicle well with soap before driving it into the bird production area. Launder all clothes that you have worn to the feed store before wearing them to care for your birds.

If you must borrow equipment from a neighbor follow the same guidelines as those for feed store visits.

Know the warning signs of infectious bird diseases Watch for early signs to prevent the spread of disease. Report sick birds. Report unusual signs of disease or unexpected deaths. If domestic poultry or other farm birds exhibit signs of bird flu (ranging from sneezing, coughing and ruffled feathers to sudden and high numbers of bird losses), bird owners should consult their local veterinary professional and notify the State Veterinarian’s Office at 615-837-5120 or local Extension Office.

For additional information on these and other topics, contact the UT Extension Office, 925 East Baddour Parkway, Lebanon, TN 37087, 615-444-9584 or acorrell@utk.edu. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in all programs. Visit the UT/TSU Extension webpage at http://utextension.tennessee.edu/wilson or look for UT & TSU Extension, Wilson County on Facebook.

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