



Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

235 Promenade Street | Providence, RI 02908 | 401.222.4700 | www.dem.ri.gov | @RhodeIslandDEM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Friday, May 6, 2022

CONTACT:

Mike Healey, 401-258-0787

Michael.Healey@dem.ri.gov

HUMAN CASE OF AVIAN INFLUENZA A(H5) VIRUS CONFIRMED IN THE U.S., BUT AVIAN INFLUENZA HAS NOT BEEN DETECTED IN R.I. AND PUBLIC HEALTH RISK IS LOW

PROVIDENCE – In light of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announcement of the first human case of avian influenza A(H5) in the United States last week, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is reconfirming that its ongoing surveillance efforts have not detected highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in Rhode Island thus far. The Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) and DEM are informing Rhode Islanders that the public health risk to humans remains low.



Rhode Island is now the only state in New England that has not detected HPAI in wild or domestic birds or flocks. To date, the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Veterinary Services Laboratories has confirmed HPAI in commercial and backyard flocks in 29 states and in wild birds in 34 states. The disease was first detected in South Carolina in January. Rhode Island is at risk because the flu has been detected in hunter-harvested wild waterfowl reported along the Atlantic flyway, which is the migratory bird route that includes Rhode Island, and because of its proximity to the southern New England states where the disease has been found.

RIDOH and DEM are informing Rhode Islanders of the following key messages:

1. **The public health threat is low.** Although avian influenza can infect people, person-to-person spread has occurred very rarely, mainly in family clusters. Also, no sustained transmission has been noted, according to the CDC. Avian influenza viruses respond to standard antiviral drugs. The case confirmed by CDC last week involved a Colorado man who had direct contact with infected birds and

Telephone 401.222.4700 | www.dem.ri.gov | Rhode Island Relay 711

was involved in the culling (depopulating) of poultry with presumptive HPAI. The patient reported fatigue for a few days as his only symptom and has since recovered. The patient was treated with the influenza antiviral drug oseltamivir. ([Click here to read the CDC's press release.](#))

2. **The food supply remains safe.** The United States has the strongest avian influenza surveillance program in the world to ensure that the food supply remains safe. Public health officials continue to pay close attention to note any changes in the pattern of the virus and continue to prohibit the introduction of infected poultry products into the food chain.
3. **HPAI has not been detected in Rhode Island.** The state agencies are confident that their coordinated response plan will control avian influenza should there be a local case confirmed.
4. **Don't touch dead birds with your bare hands.** If HPAI is detected in Rhode Island and poultry producers and household keepers of backyard chicken coops find dead birds in their flocks, DEM urges owners to wear rubber gloves, dispose of the birds in plastic bags, and call one of the numbers below to discuss disposal options for your situation. Proper composting of dead birds or on-site burial are the preferred methods of disposal but may not be practical in all cases. Proper disposal is necessary to ensure the dead birds do not serve as a source of contamination for living birds.
5. **Contact DEM with any concerns.** Bird owners should contact DEM at 401-222-2781 if they believe there are sick birds in their flocks. To report sick or dying domestic poultry after regular business hours, call 401-222-3070. To report sick or dying wild birds, call DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife at 401-789-0281. [DEM encourages constituents to complete this online form in all suspected cases of HPAI infection.](#) Helpful tips and information about HPAI also are available online [here](#).

"The Rhode Island Division of Agriculture and Forestry remains on alert to respond to any cases of HPAI in the state," said State Veterinarian Scott Marshall, DVM, who is leading DEM's response to the HPAI threat. "We meet every other day with the New England state veterinarians and federal veterinarians from USDA to coordinate efforts. We also participate in several national-level calls every week. We are extremely grateful to the citizens of Rhode Island who are reporting sick or dead poultry so that we can triage cases, and we have tested several poultry flocks because of this reporting. Thankfully, all have tested negative so far, but we remain prepared to respond."

Dr. Marshall added that the approach of warmer weather is a positive factor. "Historically, warmer and drier weather signals a lower risk of HPAI as these conditions do not favor survivability of the virus in the environment," he said. "There is nothing to indicate this outbreak will be different. Nationally, cases have been trending lower for three weeks in commercial poultry and for backyard poultry, although last week showed a small blip increase in backyard cases."

Avian influenza, sometimes called bird flu or avian flu, is a disease of birds, usually carried by wild waterfowl and other waterbirds. Sometimes, this disease also can spread from wild birds into domestic poultry. HPAI infection brings a grim prognosis, with domestic poultry mortality rates surpassing 90 percent. Without control of the spread by humanely killing infected chickens, all poultry could be wiped out across the state. Humanely depopulating infected birds will limit how much they suffer from the infection and remove them as a source of infection for other birds.

[Since advising the public about HPAI in March](#), DEM has focused on reaching out to poultry owners to protect their flocks by enhancing biosecurity. [Biosecurity](#), Dr. Marshall explains, involves basic but essential measures such as restricting access to and keeping people away from your birds; keeping your birds separated from all wild birds, particularly migratory waterfowl; keeping cages, coops, and clothes clean and disinfected; properly disposing of dead birds; not sharing equipment with other poultry producers or

farmers; knowing the warning signs of infectious diseases, and reporting sick birds or unusual bird deaths to DEM.

For more information on the avian flu, how it's transmitted, symptoms, and emergency response, please visit our [website](#). For more information about DEM divisions and programs, follow us on [Facebook](#), Twitter (@RhodeIslandDEM), or Instagram (@rhodeisland.dem) for timely updates.

###