

AVIAN INFLUENZA

The Extension office has taken some calls this week regarding reports of Avian Influenza (AI) in wild birds. Commercial and back yard poultry growers have concern for the wellbeing of their birds and consumers are troubled about the safety of poultry products.

A recent news release from Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF) states that AI was recently found in wild birds in California, Oregon and Washington. The State of Utah has activated a multi-agency response plan because AI was confirmed in a wild bird in Davis County. Several other wild birds taken by hunters are also undergoing tests. Fortunately, there is no immediate public health concern due to the recent detection of the AI virus.

Dr. Warren Hess, Acting State Veterinarian with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, said the discovery of AI in a wild bird is not a surprise since Utah is in a major migratory bird flight path. There is a possibility of the disease being transmitted to domestic bird flocks. Bird owners are advised to take careful bio-security measures to protect their small flocks. The virus has not been found in commercial poultry anywhere in the United States. Surveillance for avian influenza is ongoing in commercial flocks, live bird markets, and in migratory wild bird populations.

A USDA fact sheet reports that the AI virus can infect chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quail, ducks, geese, guinea fowl and a variety of other birds. Migratory waterfowl have proved to be a natural reservoir for the less infectious strains of the disease. Clinical signs of birds infected with AI may include one or more of the following: Sudden death without clinical signs; Lack of energy and appetite; Decreased egg production; Soft-shelled or misshapen eggs; Swelling of the head, eyelids, comb; wattles and hocks; Purple discoloration of the wattles, combs, and legs; Nasal discharge; Coughing; Sneezing; Lack of coordination; and Diarrhea.

Exposure of domestic poultry to migratory waterfowl and the international movement of poultry, poultry equipment, and people pose risks for the introduction and movement of this disease. Once introduced, the disease can spread from bird to bird by direct contact. AI viruses can also be spread by manure, dirty equipment, vehicles, egg flats, crates, and people whose clothing or shoes have come in contact with the virus. AI viruses can remain viable at moderate temperatures for long periods in the environment. The virus can also survive indefinitely in frozen material.

What bio-security tips can poultry owners use to protect their birds? First, keep your birds from comingling with other birds, especially wild birds. Next, restrict access to your birds, particularly from people who own birds that are housed outside. When buying birds, request certification from the seller that the birds come from healthy stock. New birds should be isolated from other birds for at least 30 days. It is also a good idea to have new birds examined by a veterinarian who knows poultry.

Sanitation is also an essential practice to keep flocks healthy. When near other birds, clothing and shoes should always be clean and perhaps disinfected. Make it a practice to thoroughly wash hands with soap and water before and after handling any birds. Cages, pens, feeders and water systems must also be

clean. It is best not to borrow or share poultry supplies. If you must, clean and disinfect the items before bringing them home to expose your own birds.

US Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS), UDAF, Wildlife Resources and the Utah Health Department are all working closely to monitor the presence of or movement of AI. Backyard flock owners and domestic poultry owners can report sick birds to the State Veterinarian's office at 1-801-538-4910 or by calling USDA toll free at 1-866-536-7593. Also, if anyone finds wild bird carcasses that are not near power poles or roads, and that involve five or more carcasses; please contact a DWR office by calling 801-538-4700.

Utah's commercial poultry has a robust avian influenza testing program. Since AI has not currently been found in commercial poultry anywhere in the United States there is no need to shy away from eating poultry or poultry products. The USDA states that all poultry, poultry products and wild birds are safe to eat so long as they are properly handled and cooked to a temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.