

Bird Flu Awareness

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Because of recent cases of pathogenic strains of avian influenza in the western United States and Canada, it is important for hobby and backyard chicken owners to understand the disease and know what they can do to protect their flocks.

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According to David Frame, Utah State University Extension poultry specialist, avian influenza (AI), commonly referred to as "bird flu," is a highly contagious viral disease that can cause sickness and death in domestic poultry.

"If highly pathogenic forms of AI occur in commercial chicken or turkey operations, our international commerce of poultry products could be drastically affected," he said.

Frame said backyard chicken owners should be aware of signs of the disease which include swelling around the head, heavy nasal discharge, sustained coughing and sneezing or sudden death.

He said there are measures chicken owners can take to protect their flocks from exposure and infection.

"First and foremost do not to co-mingle chickens and other poultry with waterfowl, either wild or domestic," he said. "Waterfowl are the natural hosts for AI viruses, and they can shed the virus through their feces, contaminating surface waters and infecting nearby poultry. Waterfowl normally do not show signs of illness; however, once poultry are infected, serious illness and death may occur."

Frame said counties adjacent to large bodies of water where migrating waterfowl tend to congregate are at greater risk, including Box Elder, Weber, Davis, Salt Lake, Tooele, Juab and Utah counties.

"It is important to keep all domestic poultry away from swamps, ditches and ponds," he said. "Never allow your chickens to have access to pond or ditch water, and provide clean chlorinated drinking water at all times – preferably from a culinary water source."

Other prevention measures include not visiting neighbors' chicken flocks, especially if they are known to be sick, and using dedicated footwear and outerwear when caring for the home flock.

"Leave boots and coveralls in an adjacent covered container between flock visits," he said. "And wash hands with soap and disinfect before entering and leaving the flock."

He said for those who hunt waterfowl, it is absolutely necessary that hunting clothes, boots and gloves are changed and do not come into contact with domestic poultry, and hands should be washed and disinfected before going near the home flock. In addition, game should be dressed and cleaned in an area away from the flock, and entrails and feathers should be stored in a sealed container.

Frame's final tip is to keep chickens in an escape-proof enclosure, such as a backyard run, preferably covered with wire or netting to keep them away from other birds.

He said high death rates in a group of chickens or other domestic poultry should be reported to the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food at 801-538-7100, and unusual wild bird/waterfowl die-offs should be reported to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources at 801-538-4700.

For further information, a recorded presentation of a recent webinar on avian influenza presented by Frame and Warren Hess, acting state veterinarian, can be accessed at <http://chicken.usu.edu> under "Resources."