Poultry in Midwest infected with bird flu; Illinois prepares

by Patricia Stanton, Illinois Ag Extension
April 24 2015 9:40 AM

Avian influenza, also known as bird flu, has been reported in the Midwest, causing illness among poultry and temporarily disrupting deliveries and supplies of eggs. Although the virus has not been seen in Illinois, University of Illinois, Department of Animal Sciences Professor Kenneth Koelkebeck is alerting poultry farmers in the state so that they can take necessary precautions to avoid infection in their flocks.

“The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention consider the risk of infection to people to be low,” Koelkebeck said. “In fact, no human infections with the virus (subtype H5N2) have ever been detected.” Worldwide, there are many strains of the virus, he said. One is considered to be a low pathogenic virus that occurs naturally in wild birds and migratory waterfowl without causing illness. However, the strain that is occurring in the United States at this time is Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI).

“HPAI is extremely infectious and fatal to chickens and turkeys and can spread rapidly from flock to flock,” Koelkebeck said. “Poultry and egg farmers are on high alert for any signs of the disease in their flocks and will strive to keep their customers informed of any problems associated with this disease.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture also is working with its partners to actively look and test for the disease in commercial poultry operations, live bird markets, and in migratory wild bird populations.

Koelkebeck also stressed that the United States has the best avian influenza surveillance program in the world. As part of existing U.S. Department of Agriculture avian influenza response plans, federal and state partners as well as poultry and egg farmers are responding quickly and decisively to these HPAI cases. The five basic steps are: to

restrict the movement of poultry into and out of a control area; humanely euthanize the affected birds; test wild and domestic birds in and around quarantined areas; destroy the virus in the affected flock locations; and confirm that the poultry farm is virus-free.

“In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is working with its partners to actively look and test for the disease in commercial poultry operations, live bird markets, and in migratory wild bird populations,” Koelkebeck said.

The virus is most often spread via direct contact between infected birds and healthy birds but may also spread indirectly through contact with contaminated materials and equipment with droppings from infected birds. Consequently, as a precaution, people who keep poultry or have pet birds are encouraged to keep them indoors and avoid contact with waterfowl of any kind, particularly Canada geese. Waterfowl hunters who own poultry, after returning from the field, should shower and change clothes and shoes before entering poultry houses.

U of I Extension reports that properly prepared poultry and eggs are safe to eat. Even with the virus’s presence in the Midwest, it is unlikely that an infected bird would enter the food supply. Flocks are routinely tested for avian influenza prior to birds or eggs leaving the farm for processing. Proper cooking kills the avian influenza virus, just as it does many other germs.

The last large outbreak of bird flu was in 2004.