

Chairman Chambliss, Ranking Member Harkin, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee this afternoon. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) appreciates your continued support of our efforts to ensure that preparedness for a potential introduction of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus into the U.S. poultry population remains high. I welcome the opportunity to provide you with updates on several of our most important initiatives, including our development of a draft National Avian Influenza Response Plan to guide our actions, in conjunction with involved State and industry personnel, in the event of a detection of the disease in poultry.

But first, I would like to briefly touch on a few other key funding and program initiatives that have unfolded since November 2005, when I last testified on avian influenza before the Committee.

National Implementation Plan for Pandemic Influenza

Most notably, just last week, President Bush announced his Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza. The Implementation Plan takes the major components of the President's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza and breaks them down into more than 300 critical actions. The Plan directs involved Federal agencies to carry out these critical actions within prescribed amounts of time. The Plan is helping to ensure that the Federal government, along with our State and local partners, continues to take appropriate steps in preparation for a possible influenza pandemic in the country.

As we know, this disease, first and foremost, continues to affect birds. However, we know it has caused acute illness and, in some cases, death in people who have had direct contact with sick birds. We know that the virus, through mutation, could present a much greater risk to human health worldwide. So, there are both animal health and human health aspects of the Federal government's preparations.

As the President's Implementation Plan makes clear, these preparations are being closely coordinated among several departments, as well as with States and industry. USDA is the lead agency in terms of dealing with the disease in poultry. The Implementation Plan directs USDA to play either a leadership or coordinating role in 98 critical actions. These include initiatives such as continuing our support of the coordinated efforts overseas to slow the spread of the disease in poultry; expanding our domestic surveillance and early warning systems; and ensuring we have a strong plan in place to guide, along with our partners, the swift, decisive response to any eventual detection of highly pathogenic H5N1 in poultry here in our country.

As we work to complete these critical actions in the coming weeks and months, USDA will continue to use a four-pronged approach to combating avian influenza. First, we are focused on keeping this threat offshore by supporting other nations affected with this virus through robust

support to the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza and by adopting a coordinated approach to work with affected countries through the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (OIE). Second, we are conducting a proactive messaging campaign designed to educate the American public and poultry owners on this animal disease. We want to inform while not alarming. A third pillar of our doctrine is an aggressive surveillance program that focuses on four key areas: wild bird surveillance; commercial poultry operations; live bird markets; and backyard flocks. The fourth and final pillar of our doctrine is, when necessary, to execute our existing plans. As the Committee knows, we have a long and successful history of dealing with foreign animal diseases and, in particular, handling avian influenza.

I want to emphasize to the Committee that in taking this multi-faceted approach, we are not waiting for the virus to reach our shores before we begin coordinating our preparedness and response efforts with our partners. For us, the threat is real and many important planning and coordination efforts are already well underway. Our strategy is that we are preparing as if the virus will reach U.S. poultry, while taking measures where possible to prevent it. I believe this approach is the right one to take, and will pay off greatly in the event this highly pathogenic H5N1, or another serious avian influenza virus, reaches our country.

Summary of Pandemic Influenza Supplemental Funding for USDA

Last December, Congress approved, and President Bush signed into law, a supplemental funding bill for pandemic influenza preparedness that included \$91.35 million for USDA. Since that time, we have been working expeditiously to ensure that our plans for using these funds are strategically sound and fully coordinated with our many international, Federal, State, local, and industry cooperators. We have taken these responsibilities so seriously, in fact, that we have utilized USDA's and APHIS' emergency operations centers to coordinate our efforts. Our animal health officials have also worked under an incident command structure to maximize their communications, planning, and logistical capabilities.

Let me quickly summarize the international and domestic initiatives funded by supplemental appropriations:

? We are using approximately \$20 million to help affected countries overseas in collaboration with international organizations. We are participating in a coordinated effort by the various interested U.S. Government agencies, led by the Department of State, to work with affected countries through the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). I just returned from a meeting in Rome regarding the FAO's development of an emergency operations command center within its headquarters to better track the spread of the H5N1 virus in poultry and coordinate response efforts.

? On the domestic front, we are utilizing approximately \$72 million from the supplemental

appropriation, in part, to:

- o Enhance smuggling interdiction and trade compliance (\$9 million);
- o Continue research and development of improved tools like vaccines, genome sequencing; environmental surveillance and biosecurity measures (\$7 million);
- o Enhance surveillance of wildlife/bird flyways (\$18 million);
- o Strengthen other domestic surveillance and diagnostics (about \$18 million);
- o Increase the current animal vaccine stockpile and stock other response supplies (\$10 million);
- o Enhance planning, equipment, and preparedness training, and the development of simulation models (\$9 million); and
- o Improve a variety of other preparedness activities (\$1 million)

Migratory Bird Surveillance

Another area where we have taken steps to obtain better information regarding any potential disease threat to U.S. poultry is migratory bird surveillance. Wild birds, in particular certain species of waterfowl and shorebirds, are considered to be the natural reservoirs for many common, relatively harmless strains of avian influenza.

On March 20, 2006, the Departments of Agriculture, the Interior, and Health and Human Services released an inter-agency strategic plan that expands the monitoring of migratory birds in the United States for the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus and establishes common protocol for testing birds and tracking the data.

"An Early Detection System for Asian H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Wild Migratory Birds -- U.S. Interagency Strategic Plan" reflects the best possible scientific information on the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus and the migratory patterns of wild birds. In addition, the plan draws on ongoing partnerships with State and private wildlife experts, animal health experts, as well as public health officials.

The plan targets bird species in North America that have the highest risk of being exposed to, or infected with, highly pathogenic H5N1 because of their migratory movement patterns. Key species of interest include ducks, geese, and shorebirds.

Personnel from USDA, Department of the Interior, State wildlife agencies, and other cooperators will work closely to obtain samples and test them for avian influenza viruses of concern.

Under the new enhanced surveillance program for migratory birds, APHIS officials began sampling efforts in Alaska in late April. I would note here that between 1998 and 2005, USDA's Agricultural Research Service and the University of Alaska partnered to test some

12,000 samples taken from wild migratory birds in Alaska for avian influenza viruses of concern, as well as exotic Newcastle Disease (END). All these samples were negative for avian influenza viruses of concern to us, as well as END.

In other areas under the enhanced migratory bird surveillance plan, APHIS has also begun sampling Eastern wild turkeys in collaboration with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. And just last week, our National Wildlife Research Center began processing environmental water and fecal samples collected from areas of Alaska that harbor high-risk waterfowl and shorebirds. Other states will begin collecting similar high-risk environmental samples in June based on migration patterns.

State and Industry Cooperation on Avian Influenza

I would like to turn now to the strong cooperative efforts APHIS is engaged in with our State and industry partners relative to avian influenza. The U.S. Poultry and Egg Association convened an industry-wide meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 27, to facilitate dialogue with State and USDA officials regarding the many operational, policy, and communications issues related to our cooperative avian influenza preparedness efforts. I and many of APHIS' senior animal health staff attended the meeting, which was extremely beneficial to all who attended.

I believe APHIS is in an excellent position to maintain these kinds of effective working relationships because of the partnerships we have forged with State animal health officials and the poultry industry over the years. Several programs are helping to foster close relations with States and industry. One of them is the longstanding National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP), a cooperative Federal-State-industry program designed to enhance the health and marketability of commercial U.S. poultry. The other is our new low-pathogenic avian influenza program--which this Committee has supported. These are serving as springboards as we enhance surveillance efforts, enter into additional cooperative agreements with States, and tighten our emergency response plans.

We are using approximately \$5.9 million in supplemental funding for the NPIP cooperative effort to enhance the testing of commercial flocks--broilers, layers, turkeys, and their respective breeding flocks--for avian influenza viruses of concern. The supplemental also includes \$2.9 million for surveillance by APHIS' National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL). This funding will allow NVSL to provide support to approved laboratories for the processing of samples. This includes all segments of the surveillance program for H5N1, including samples collected from wildlife, commercial poultry, and the live bird marketing system in the United States.

This funding will also allow NVSL to develop and contract out the production of agar gel immunodiffusion (AGID) testing reagents to be distributed at no charge to laboratories approved to participate in the surveillance effort. In this way, we will meet the poultry industry's desire to test all broiler flocks in the United States for avian influenza and, more

broadly, surveillance across the board will be strengthened.

The Draft National Avian Influenza Response Plan

Now that I have touched on all of our plans to bolster domestic surveillance for avian influenza, I'd like to update you on our plans for responding to a detection of any highly pathogenic avian influenza in commercial poultry.

Prior to poultry industry meeting in Atlanta, APHIS posted to its website a draft summary of the National Avian Influenza Response Plan. This plan would guide the steps taken by USDA and our State and industry partners following a detection of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in domestic poultry. It reflects USDA's scientific expertise on highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses, as well as our real world experience in planning for, and responding to, incursions of significant animal diseases into the United States.

In addition, the plan draws on our ongoing partnerships with other Federal agencies, State Agriculture Departments, State Veterinarians, the poultry industry, and the conservation and wildlife communities. In this way, the plan is designed to be flexible and does not supersede any State response plans. Rather, it complements such plans already in existence, or under development.

As a result of tabletop exercises and numerous meetings and discussions with our partners, the response plan incorporates much positive feedback. In releasing a summary of the draft document and [posting it online](#), we fully expect further review and comment by stakeholders. In this way, we intend for the response plan to be an evolving document that takes into account the latest scientific information and approaches to emergency preparedness and response.

Let me elaborate a bit further on the Response Plan. As the Committee knows, USDA has in place a robust emergency response program designed to complement all of our surveillance efforts. When we have unexpected poultry, or for that matter livestock, illnesses or deaths on a farm, we immediately conduct a foreign animal disease investigation. We have a cadre of specially trained veterinarians who can be on site within four hours to conduct an initial examination and submit samples for additional laboratory testing. Also, HHS is providing occupational health guidance on the use of personal protective equipment and antiviral prophylaxis treatments to USDA and other departments that have personnel in direct contact with live infected or dead poultry.

In conjunction with our State colleagues, APHIS maintains State-level emergency response teams on standby. These teams will typically be on site within 24 hours of the initial examination and diagnosis of a presumptive diagnosis of avian influenza or any other significant foreign animal disease. Destruction of the affected flocks would be our primary

concern and course of action. We would also work with State or tribes to possibly impose State-level quarantines and movement restrictions.

For highly pathogenic avian influenza as well as for low pathogenic H5 and H7 subtypes, the Response Plan provides guidelines as to how APHIS would work with States to quarantine affected premises and clean and disinfect those premises after the birds have been depopulated and disposed. Surveillance testing would also be conducted in the quarantine zone and surrounding area to ensure that the virus has been completely eradicated.

I would like to note here that APHIS also maintains a bank of avian influenza vaccines for animals in the event that the vaccine would be a potential course of action in any outbreak situation. I need to stress here, however, that wide-scale vaccination of poultry is not our primary strategy against avian influenza. Rather, poultry vaccination could be used in response to widespread detection of the disease in the United States to create barriers against further spread and assist with our overall control and eradication measures.

The Response Plan's focus, first and foremost, is on quickly containing and eradicating this virus before it has the chance to spread further in the poultry population.

Conclusion

Allow me to close by offering a couple of thoughts that I believe are absolutely central to our discussion today. These points are also a critical part of understanding the broader context in which I believe avian influenza should be viewed.

First, just like in people, there are many strains of influenza that affect birds, with varying degrees of impact and importance.

Second, a detection of the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus circulating overseas in birds here in the United States does not signal the start of a human pandemic. This virus is not easily transmitted from person to person. As I said, human illnesses overseas have resulted from direct contact with sick or dead birds.

Third, a detection in wild birds does not mean the virus will reach a commercial poultry operation. We are certainly preparing as if it will, but the U.S. poultry industry employs a very sophisticated system of firewalls to protect the safety of their product. In addition, the wild migratory bird surveillance plan is serving as an early warning system for commercial poultry operations.

Fourth, even if the virus reaches a commercial poultry operation, there is no reason for consumers to be concerned about the safety of the poultry that they purchase and eat. Again, I believe that our state of readiness for such an event is high, and our Response Plan would guide a swift, comprehensive response designed to minimize further spread of the disease.

Finally, as always, consumers should take proper precautions in preparation and cooking, which will also protect them from avian influenza. Properly prepared poultry is safe.