

Chairman Chambliss and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear today on behalf of the National Chicken Council which represents companies that produce, process and market about 95 percent of the chicken sold in the United States. I am Don Waldrip, Director of Animal Health and Live Production for Wayne Farms, LLC. We are headquartered in Oakwood, Georgia, and have production and processing facilities in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and North Carolina.

It is my understanding that the committee is seeking information on the role of U.S. agriculture in the control and eradication of avian influenza. I will specifically address the role of the U.S. chicken industry.

Let me start by stating some facts that should be obvious but somehow seem to get lost in the media coverage and hype over the possibility of a worldwide flu pandemic.

? First and most important, the H5N1 highly pathogenic strain of avian influenza, referred to as "Asian flu" does not exist in the United States and has never been present in chickens in this country.

? An influenza virus capable of causing a pandemic with sustained human-to-human spread is not known to exist anywhere in the world today.

? Chicken produced and sold in the United States is safe to eat. Even if the avian influenza virus should ever be present, there is no danger of acquiring influenza from cooked food. Viruses are destroyed by the heat of normal cooking.

? The U.S. poultry industry and our government have in place measures that are intended to prevent the entry of H5N1 AI into the United States. I will discuss these measures in more detail.

? If the disease should enter the United States, it would be quickly detected through testing and surveillance. Infected flocks would be quickly destroyed. The disease would be eradicated by isolating the affected flocks, destroying all birds in the flock, and testing all flocks in the control area.

? Finally, if the H5N1 virus, now in Asia and Eastern Europe, should change and evolve sufficiently to become a direct threat to humans in the United States, it is logical to assume that the virus would be spread from human to human rather than from birds to humans.

As referenced earlier, the United States has multiple lines of defense against Asian H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza.

? The United States has never imported any poultry products from the countries now affected by AI. They have never been authorized to ship poultry products to the United States. In addition, USDA quarantines and tests live birds to make sure that pet birds and other avian species from anywhere in the world do not inadvertently introduce diseases, including AI, into the United States.

? We already have extensive surveillance and testing programs in place for the commercial poultry industry and anticipate the level of testing will continue to increase. The federal government, state governments and the poultry industry work cooperatively.

? The U.S. Department of Interior routinely tests migratory waterfowl in Alaska and all along the Pacific flyway, looking for any signs that wild birds might carry the virus to this country. They have found no H5N1 to date.

? The chicken industry has adopted a policy, identical to that of the U.S. Government, that no one who has been to an area where the "Asian flu" is present should visit a U.S. poultry farm or hatchery for at least seven days.

Perhaps the most important point I can make is that the poultry industry in the United States is structurally different -- extremely different -- from the industry in those Asian countries where H5N1 has posed a major problem.

Poultry production in the affected areas of Asia relies mostly on small farms and free roaming backyard or village poultry of mixed species that come in frequent and close contact with people. The virus is present in wild birds, especially water- fowl, and there is often a commingling of several domestic and wild avian species. Live bird markets are popular in most Asian countries, and these markets create almost perfect conditions for the perpetuation of avian influenza viruses.

In stark contrast, chickens in the United States are mostly raised in enclosed houses, a practice which greatly reduces the risk of exposure to wild birds and predators. Good biosecurity practices are followed on the farms and throughout our production or live operations, and the health status of the flocks are monitored throughout the growout cycle. As mentioned earlier, the coordinated surveillance and testing program conducted by industry and government in this country simply does not exist in Asia. If testing and flock surveillance should result in a positive finding of an H5 or H7 strain of AI in the United States, it would be the policy of our industry and government to eradicate the avian influenza as quickly as possible after detection. We would immediately destroy the infected flock or flocks and institute quarantines and testing on other flocks in that area.

The United States has not had a major outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza in over 20 years. About four million broilers and 11 million laying hens died or were destroyed in a 1983-84 outbreak in Pennsylvania. The strain was H5N2, and there were no human health implications. Since the early 1900's milder forms of avian influenza have occurred occasionally in the United States and in other countries. The U.S. poultry industry and government have learned from experience that the best policy is to eradicate avian influenza outbreaks as quickly as possible after detection.

We believe our commercial poultry industry and the United States government have good practices in place to prevent the introduction of the Asian H5N1 virus in this country. We also believe that our monitoring and surveillance programs and good biosecurity practices will help us deal promptly and effectively with any mild form of AI that could occur in the future.

I can further assure this Committee that the U.S. chicken industry is looking beyond the status quo to determine what else we should be doing. We are reviewing our testing and surveillance procedures as well as our biosecurity practices. We are developing educational and training materials. In short, our industry takes the subject of avian influenza seriously.

Despite all the media attention and talk of a possible human pandemic, no one can say with certainty that there will be one. In its current form, H5N1 does not easily infect people. Perhaps the best way we can prevent a pandemic or keep the Asian flu from spreading to other

countries, including the United States, is to step up our efforts to deal with the problem and tackle the disease at its source.

A top official with the Food and Agriculture Organization was quoted last week as saying "the fight against bird flu must be waged in the backyards of the world's poor, where hundreds of millions of chickens dwell beyond the reach of vaccination or government scrutiny."

The resources needed to stamp out the H5N1 virus at its source are staggering. While no one knows for sure how much has been spent to date on trying to eliminate H5N1 from poultry worldwide, the World Bank estimates that on the basis of current programs and pledges, more will be spent on stockpiling flu drugs than on efforts to control the disease in poultry at its source.

We believe it would be a good use of resources for nations that can afford it to help those that can not afford to eradicate the H5N1 virus. That may be one of the most important weapons in our arsenal to prevent the spread of the H5N1 virus to this country.