

**House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee  
Hearing on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza  
Testimony of  
Executive Deputy Secretary Greg Hostetter  
&  
State Veterinarian Alex Hamberg VMD Ph.D., Director of Animal Health and Diagnostic  
Services  
Presented on behalf of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture  
November 14, 2023**

Chairman Pashinski, Chairman Moul, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in Pennsylvania, the impact of HPAI on the Commonwealth's poultry industry, and the collaborative efforts of the Department, industry, and our partners to mitigate these impacts.

Pennsylvania has more than 11,000 poultry flocks, \$7.1 billion in related economic activity and wages, and 53,000 jobs tied to the poultry industry. In addition to our own infrastructure, we are truly the keystone state for commerce, with livestock moving in and out for sale, processing, and transport. An HPAI disease outbreak would be devastating financially to our state, region, consumers, and industry. Having the necessary resources to prepare and mount a timely and effective response-and-recover system is critical.

When HPAI returned to the Commonwealth in April 2022, after a nearly 40-year hiatus, Pennsylvania had incorporated its own lessons learned from the previous outbreak in the early 1980s and from preparedness efforts of USDA following an outbreak in other states in 2015. These lessons included strengthening our statewide infrastructure for response to include our Pennsylvania Animal Diagnostic Laboratory System, building communication triage channels throughout industry, activating Incident Management Teams, identifying resources for response, and highlighting areas for improvement and the need for constant vigilance. Each lesson sharpened our focus, refined our protocols, strengthened our partnerships, and built our resolve and capacity to respond.

### **HPAI Overview**

Avian influenza (AI) is caused by an influenza type A virus. Avian influenza viruses occur naturally in wild birds, especially waterfowl and shore or wading birds. Wild bird species (such as ducks and geese) can carry and spread Avian Influenza viruses without becoming ill. Avian influenza in birds is very contagious and can cause serious disease and high mortality in domestic poultry and game birds such as chickens, quail, pheasants, guinea fowl, and turkeys.

- Convened a HPAI task force with the industry and academia to collaborate on all aspects of response and recovery planning.
- Established an Incident Command Structure; developed a plan and prepared for an activation of the Department of Agriculture for that plan to manage the response.
- Conducted tabletop exercises to practice various scenarios and familiarize the department's staff and industry stakeholders with response and recovery activities in the event of an outbreak.
- Communicate regularly with, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, Department of General Services, Department of Health, Department of Environmental Protection, the Pennsylvania State Police, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, and U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) Veterinary Services and Wildlife Services to identify possible needs during a large outbreak and coordinate resources.
- Established response protocols with USDA APHIS and discussed biosecurity measures for responders and the industry, as well as protocols for federal indemnification, the depopulation and disposal of dead birds, and how to permit the movement of poultry and poultry products into, and out of quarantine zones.
- Suspended all avian shows at county fairs in 2015, a precedent we used again during the 2022 and 2023 fair season and the Pennsylvania Farm Show.
- Established the Center for Poultry and Livestock Excellence through the PA Farm Bill in 2019 to support the animal ag industry with biosecurity planning and disease prevention, processing capacity, and food safety and quality assurance. The Center has focused on activities and research projects to enhance biosecurity, diagnostic testing, veterinary telemedicine and other strategies to prevent, detect and manage animal diseases and protect the food supply.
- Issued an interstate quarantine order requiring all poultry moving to live bird markets and flocks producing eggs destined for commercial breaking operations in Pennsylvania to meet a 72-hour testing requirement.
- Issued another quarantine order for Cleaning and Disinfecting for trucks and equipment prior to transport poultry, unprocessed goods or products of poultry or any combination of those into, within, through or from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
- Published a quarantine order in October of 2021 to require Pennsylvania live bird markets to enroll as either a tested market or an untested market. Tested markets may purchase and resell only poultry which has been test-negative for avian influenza, thus reducing the risk of introducing the virus into the markets. HPAI has not been identified in Pennsylvania markets from 2022 to date, although the virus was confirmed in three New York markets and one New Jersey market in late Fall of 2023.
- Engaged backyard flocks and hobby farmers through concentrated messaging and coordination with agricultural organizations like Penn Ag, PA Farm Bureau, Pennsylvania Certified Organic, and key stakeholders like Amish bishops.
- Implemented a business and transportation permitting system for use during emergency response.

Due to these gaps and the poultry industry's impact on the economy, workforce, and supply chain, the Department of Agriculture worked with the legislature and administration to provide additional support to help address direct losses and negative economic impacts.

As an exceptional response, the General Assembly and administration appropriated \$31 million in the 2022-2023 budget to combat HPAI. The Fiscal Code established that \$6 million would be used to pay for the testing necessary to monitor and control the disease and the remaining \$25 million was to be used for a first-of-its-kind reimbursement grant program to ensure continuity of business for premises impacted by the disease or control zones.

This special appropriation, which was reallocated in the 2023-24 budget, remains critical to Pennsylvania's response and recovery efforts. We remain the only state with these funds but have been approached by USDA and other states to use this as a model for similar programs across the nation.

Through these funds, the Department established the HPAI Recovery Reimbursement Grant Program to provide reimbursement to farms, integrators, and allied industries, directly impacted by HPAI and suffering demonstrable financial losses due to inclusion in a control or quarantine zone.

Impacted businesses will continue to be reimbursed up to 100% of the first \$100,000 of eligible documented losses. Eligible documented losses above \$100,000 will be reimbursed up to 50%, with a maximum cap on reimbursement of \$1,000,000. The maximum cap for applicants will be per event in the Commonwealth.

To date, the Department has administered \$11,880,698.08 in grants to 121 producers, including 21 who were eligible for a second round of payments to meet the maximum allowance.

Following the successful administration of this program, the Department furthered the grants by adding provisions for Implementation of Biosecurity Enhancement Guidelines. This program is intended to encourage implementation of new practices or enhancement of current practices. By using a well written biosecurity plan to identify all areas to address and improve practices. Operating expenses are not eligible, with a one-time exception if the operator never used disinfectant or PPE (starter kit). Each premise is eligible for up to \$25,000 and will need to submit per premise but for convenience you can submit a bundle of applications.

To date, the Department has awarded \$233,493.55, with 19 applications approved.

## **Looking Forward**

Based upon these actions and many more, we can easily demonstrate that the need for preparedness has been recognized in Pennsylvania – across all levels of government and within the poultry industry. I can assure you that this need for preparedness has the attention of the Governor and executive leadership across the Commonwealth, and I want to personally thank each member of this Committee and General Assembly who has supported these efforts.

I would also like to recognize the steadfast and diligent teams of the Department, USDA, and our partners for their incredible response and efforts. In October 2024, the Pennsylvania Veterinary Lab and field staff were recognized by a Governor’s Award for Excellence for their work, day and night, seven-days-a-week to provide crucial support to the industry throughout the 2022 avian influenza outbreak. The team processed a tremendously high volume of samples from poultry producers across the state, providing quick, accurate test results so that field staff and farm managers had the necessary information to direct the emergency response.

The team, in concert with the two other veterinary labs that make up the PA Diagnostic Laboratory System, provided urgent testing required for decision-making and response, while continuing to perform other critical diagnostics to monitor for and respond to rabies, chronic wasting disease, and other contagious and foreign animal diseases that threaten Pennsylvania’s food supply, public health, and economy.

The lessons we have been able to learn from the Midwest, in addition to the positive communication and cooperation from USDA, academia, and the poultry industry, place us ahead of the curve for any future HPAI response and will allow us to minimize the effects of this disease. Together, we can respond quickly and decisively to support our farmers.

As we move through the fall season, it will also be critical to ensure that the lines between human health and animal health and the role that HPAI plays in both are not blurred. Our food supply is safe, and we continue to engage our partners across the industry to build resiliency and security.

Thank you.