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Industry prepares as avian flu cases expected to increase as birds migrate south

Thiessen spoke to reporters along with Ray Nickel right, president of the BB Poultry Committee during a news conference in Abbotsford, B.C. Monday April 5, 2004. (CP PHOTO/Chuck Stoody)

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VANCOUVER - Animal health experts are warning about avian flu returning to poultry farms as wild birds begin migrating south for the winter.

Ray Nickel, spokesman for the B.C. Poultry Association Emergency Operations Centre, said farmers and operators are using the lessons they learned over the past year to better prepare for potential outbreaks this fall.

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"After the onslaught from last year, we had a very quiet summer, which we were quite thankful for," he said in an interview Thursday.

But, he said, the province remains on "high alert" this fall.

"We're fully expecting to have increased pressure here, particularly the next month to two months," he said.

The highly infectious strain of H5N1 was first detected in Canadian farms in late 2021 and has continued to infect farms since then.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency said the strain can cause serious disease and death in birds. It believes migratory birds are responsible for the outbreaks in small and commercial poultry flocks.

The agency's latest available data show there have been 330 infected flocks countrywide, affecting 7,773,000 birds, as of Sept. 28.

Almost half of the birds culled were in B.C. from 104 flocks that have been infected since April 2022.

Nickel, a commercial poultry farmer in Abbotsford and a member of the B.C. Chicken Marketing Board, said he does not expect the virus will cause as much devastation as it did last year.

"I say that because we're not getting nearly the number of infections that we were getting last year but, given the impact to industry, we have no choice but to be prepared and make sure that we're ready and we're doing our due diligence."

Avian flu is spread through contact with an infected bird, its feces, or nasal secretions. Farm birds that are allowed outside are most at risk because they can come into contact with wild birds. Humans can also inadvertently carry the infection into a barn on their shoes or clothing.

Nickel said biosecurity and emergency management measures introduced after a devastating avian flu outbreak in 2004 helped to control similar outbreaks in 2009 and 2014 in B.C.

Protocols include strict procedures around locked gates, changing clothing and footwear, and monitoring entrances and exits for visitors.

"We've always had a robust emergency operation piece industry-wide in B.C. ever since 2004 and that's worked in conjunction with the B.C. ministry," Nickel said. "But the virus evolved and sort of became more prevalent last year and it resulted in us making changes to how we actually do that."

He said the emergency operations centre has two teams ready to respond in the event that a serious outbreak occurs and if culling of birds is required.

There has also been co-ordination with B.C.'s Agriculture Ministry to better prepare farmers for an influx in avian flu cases, Nickel added.

"Nationally, we also have had a lot of communication and planning work that has also been done," he said, noting the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is the lead agency.

B.C.'s Agriculture Ministry committed $5 million in the spring to help farmers with animal diseases, which it said will help livestock and poultry farmers prepare for the risk of animal disease, including avian influenza.

The ministry said the Farmed Animal Disease Program is helping fund planning and purchasing of equipment needed for disease response, training exercises, enhanced biosecurity measures, and the research and implementation of strategies that reduce the risk of infection and disease.

Agriculture Minister Pam Alexis said in a news release Thursday that avian flu can be devastating for farmers, the local economy and the food supply.

"This is why we put a program in place that is now helping them increase their biosecurity measures and providing new tools and strategies to prepare for and respond to any potential outbreak as we head into the fall migration."

Canada's inspection agency said no human cases have been detected in the country and the illness is not considered a significant concern for healthy people who are not in regular contact with infected birds.

"This is an animal disease that is very harmful to our birds and that's why we take it so seriously, but it's not affecting our food supply," Nickel said.

This report by The Canadian Press was first published Oct. 12, 2023.

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