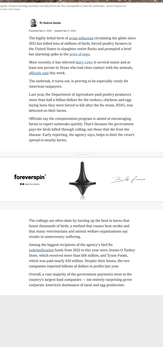
Slip-On Driving Loafers for Women
Made to Order
Free Returns
Soft Goatskin & Soft Suppleness
Shop Now

A Cruel Way to Control Bird Flu? Poultry Giants Cull and Cash In.

Big poultry firms have received millions of dollars for their losses. Animal welfare groups contend that aid reinforces inhumane killings of birds exposed to the virus.

Save article
Share article



Dynamic chicken processing contractors can help develop the virus unavoidable in natural flock environments. Andrew Hetherington for The New York Times

By Andrew Jacobs

Published March 2, 2022 Updated April 4, 2022

The highly lethal form of avian influenza circulating the globe since 2021 has killed tens of millions of birds, forced poultry farmers in dozens of countries to destroy their flocks and prompted a brief but alarming spike in egg prices.

Most recently, it has infected dairy cows in several states and at least one person in Texas who had close contact with the animal, officials said this week.

The outbreak, it turns out, is promising to be especially costly for American taxpayers.

Last year, the Department of Agriculture paid poultry producers more than half a billion dollars for the turkeys, chickens and eggs they killed in an effort to halt or slow the flu strain, H5N1, was detected on their farms.

Officials say the compensation program is aimed at encouraging farmers to report outbreaks quickly. That's because the government pays for birds killed through culling, not those that die from the disease. Early reporting, the agency says, helps to limit the virus's spread to nearby farms.

forevership
Shop Now
Made for forever

The callings are often done by turning up the heat to burn the house thousands of birds, a method that causes heat stroke and has been condemned by animal welfare organizations esp results in unnecessary suffering.

Among the biggest recipients of the agency's bird flu indemnification funds from 2021 to this year were Jeanie o'Turkey Stars, which received more than $90 million, and Tyson Foods, which was paid nearly $30 million. Despite their losses, the companies reported billions of dollars in profits last year.

Overall, a vast majority of the government payments went to the country's largest food companies — not entirely surprising given corporate America's dominance of meat and egg production.

Zoom chicken farms owned by Pilgrim's Pride. Rory Doyle for The New York Times

Since February 2022, more than 35 million farmed birds have been killed in Pilgrim's Pride's western's facilities. For context, the American poultry industry produces more than nine billion chickens and turkeys each year.

The right of compensation was obtained by Our Stories, an animal rights organization, through a Freedom of Information Act request with the U.S.D.A. The advocacy organization Farm Forward collaborated on further analysis of the data.

The breakdown of compensation has not been publicly released, but agency officials confirmed the accuracy of the figures.

In cities of large-scale commercial farming, the payments highlight a deeply flawed system of corporate subsidies, which last year totaled more than $1 billion and have been criticized by both the agriculture sector, much of it for crop insurance, conservation, price support and disaster aid.

But they say the payments related to bird flu are troubling for another reason: By compensating commercial farmers for their losses with no strings attached, the federal government is encouraging poultry growers to continue the very practices that have contributed to the outbreak, increasing the need for future callings and compensation.

"These payments are crazy making and dangerous," said Andrew deCarlo, Farm Forward's executive director. "Not only are we wasting taxpayer money on profitable companies but a problem they created has we're not giving them any incentive to make changes."

Ashley Peterson, senior vice president at scientific and regulatory affairs at the National Chicken Council, a trade association, acknowledged that some of the government payments reinforced problematic farming practices.

"Indemnification is in place to help the farmer control and eradicate the virus — regardless of how the affected birds are raised," she said in an email. The criticisms, she added, were the work of "vegan extremist groups who are latching on to an issue to try and advance their agenda."

Chickens were scooped from barns near Willmar, Minn. Rory Doyle for The New York Times

The U.S.D.A. defended the program, saying, "Early reporting allows us to more quickly stop the spread of the virus to nearby farms," according to a statement.

Although modern farming practices have made animal protein more abundant than ever before, they have also created ideal conditions for the past century, the industry's reliance on so-called concentrated animal feeding operations comes with downsides. The giant sheds that produce nearly 50 percent of the nation's eggs and meat spit off enormous quantities of animal waste that can degrade the environment, according to researchers.

Eight Republican, an avian influenza has been circulating since 1996, but the virus had evolved to become even more lethal by the time it reached Asia and Europe in 2021. It has killed an estimated one nearly 40 million farmed birds in the United States, and killed countless wild ones and a great many mammals, from skunks to sea lions. Last year, it spread to commercial farms and backyard flocks in dozens of states, including Texas, Michigan, New Mexico and Idaho. The pathogen has also killed hundreds of millions of wild birds and tens of thousands of people, mostly among those who work with live poultry, and officials say the risks to people remains low.

Many scientists, fearing that the next pandemic could emerge from a human-adapted version of bird flu, have been urging the White House to embrace a vaccination campaign.

Mike Fisher watching an exhaustion check a hen bound for the egg farm in Pittsburg, Calif. His company, Foster Farms, has been hit by bird flu and has received millions of dollars from the agency during the flu. Sarah Rice for The New York Times

The agency's livestock indemnity programs, part of a farm bill passed by Congress in 2018, pays farmers 75 percent of the value of animals lost to disease or natural disaster. Since 2021, the program has distributed more than $1 billion to affected farmers.

Critics say the program also promotes animal cruelty by allowing farmers to euthanize their flocks by the slaughter down a hen's ventilation system and pumping in hot air, a method that can take hours to kill the birds and turbulence that survive are often dispatched by a rotar of the neck.

Crystal Heath, a veterinarian and co-founder of Our Stories, said the American Veterinary Medical Association, in partnership with the agriculture department, recommended that ventilation shutdowns be used only as a last resort in extreme circumstances. She added that a vast majority of farms relied on it because the process was inexpensive and easy to carry out.

The agency's livestock indemnity programs, part of a farm bill passed by Congress in 2018, pays farmers 75 percent of the value of animals lost to disease or natural disaster. Since 2021, the program has distributed more than $1 billion to affected farmers.

Critics say the program also promotes animal cruelty by allowing farmers to euthanize their flocks by the slaughter down a hen's ventilation system and pumping in hot air, a method that can take hours to kill the birds and turbulence that survive are often dispatched by a rotar of the neck.

Crystal Heath, a veterinarian and co-founder of Our Stories, said the American Veterinary Medical Association, in partnership with the agriculture department, recommended that ventilation shutdowns be used only as a last resort in extreme circumstances. She added that a vast majority of farms relied on it because the process was inexpensive and easy to carry out.

Tyson and Jeanie's O, the top recipients of federal compensation, have built cool ventilation shutdowns, according to an analysis of Farm Forward. The agency has not released the data, and officials say the Jeanie's O brand, that unit respond to requests for comment.

This chicks on Hughes Farm in Pennsylvania. Rachel Kaplan for The New York Times

home animal welfare advocates, pointing to recent outbreaks that were allowed to run their course, question whether killing every bird on an affected farm is even the right approach. When H5N1 hit Harvest Home Animal Sanctuary in California in February 2021, the staff, with the blessing of state and federal officials, set up a state-mandated culling. Instead, California agriculture officials, citing a recently created exemption for farms that do not produce food, said they would spare the birds as long as strict quarantine measures were put in place for 120 days.

Over the next few weeks, the virus killed 28 of the farm's 300 chickens, ducks and turkeys, but the others survived even those that were exposed to the virus according to Christine Manfredo, the sanctuary's executive director.

She said the experience suggested that mass culings might be unnecessary. "There needs to be more research and other put into finding other ways of responding to this virus," Ms. Manfredo said, noting the sanctuary's fundraising and it's not solving the problem at hand.

With the northward migration in full swing, poultry farmers the Upper Midwest are holding their breath. Mr. Barnes, an organic farmer in Minnesota, said he and his neighbors fear that the avian flu will spread from farm to farm as they as strict quarantine measures were put in place for 120 days.

Over the next few weeks, the virus killed 28 of the farm's 300 chickens, ducks and turkeys, but the others survived even those that were exposed to the virus according to Christine Manfredo, the sanctuary's executive director.

She said the experience suggested that mass culings might be unnecessary. "There needs to be more research and other put into finding other ways of responding to this virus," Ms. Manfredo said, noting the sanctuary's fundraising and it's not solving the problem at hand.

With the northward migration in full swing, poultry farmers the Upper Midwest are holding their breath. Mr. Barnes, an organic farmer in Minnesota, said he and his neighbors fear that the avian flu will spread from farm to farm as they

farmer in California, said there was only so much he could do to protect the livestock at Fogline Farm given that the birds spent most of their lives outdoors.

So far, the birds remain unscathed. Perhaps it's because Mr. Barron raises a hardier breed of chicken, or maybe it's because his birds have a relatively good life, which includes high-quality feed and low stress.

"Or maybe," he said, " it's just luck."

Andrew Jacobs is a Times reporter focused on how healthcare policy, politics and corporate interests affect people's lives. More about Andrew Jacobs

A version of this article appears in print on April 4, 2024, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Cruel Way to Control Bird Flu? Poultry Giants Cull and Cash In.. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

READ 38 COMMENTS

Share full article 38

ADVERTISEMENT