

Federal government to step up bird flu monitoring this fall

July 2 2015, by Steve Karnowski

The federal government announced plans Thursday to step up monitoring wild birds for avian influenza this fall to provide an early warning of any resurgence of a disease that devastated poultry farms in the Upper Midwest.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture issued a pair of plans aimed at minimizing the impacts on domestic poultry flocks if any bird flu viruses return or mutate in migrating waterfowl and other wild birds.

"The early detection of avian influenza remains key to controlling its spread and minimizing its effects," Dr. John Clifford, the USDA's chief veterinary officer, said in a statement.

The H5N2 strain has cost poultry producers around 48 million birds since early March, according to USDA figures, hitting Iowa egg producers and Minnesota turkey growers especially hard. Iowa hasn't recorded a new case in over two weeks, while Minnesota's last case was reported nearly a month ago. Still, officials in those states said this week that they aren't ready to declare the threat over.

As part of the USDA's plans, federal and state biologists will collect around 41,000 samples from apparently healthy wild birds from targeted areas from coast to coast through March 31. The samples will be taken mostly from ducks shot by hunters, but also from live-caught birds, fecal samples collected from waterfowl habitats and a wide variety of wild birds that are found dead.

Migratory waterfowl are natural carriers of bird flu viruses and don't normally get sick from them. But highly pathogenic strains such as H5N2 are lethal to domestic poultry.

A USDA report last month concluded that wild birds, which shed flu viruses through their droppings, introduced H5N2 to farms in the Midwest, and that lapses in biosecurity and other factors—possibly including the wind—contributed to its spread. No human infections have been detected in the U.S.

While the outbreak has disrupted egg supplies and led to higher egg and roasting turkey prices, it has actually resulted in cheaper chicken-meat prices because many other countries have imposed import restrictions, the USDA said in a separate report last month.

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