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Note: This month’s Health Policy newsletter was authored by Barbara Steele, Public Policy Intern for the Institute for Emerging Issues. Barbara will graduate from North Carolina State University with a degree in Political Science and Nonprofit Management in December 2015.

How Might a Deadly Outbreak of Avian Flu Virus Affect North Carolina?

Halloween is just around the corner, bringing with it pumpkins, shorter days, and the season’s highlight - scary movies. One fright film, 2006’s Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America, shows how an avian flu outbreak spread to humans and led me to wonder…

Could Fatal Contact Happen in NC?

Across the state, farmers and agriculture experts have been taking precautions against a highly pathogenic bird flu virus that has the potential to devastate North Carolina’s $5 billion poultry industry. For the first time, North Carolina is now requiring everyone to register their poultry with the state, whether they have just a few hens or a large domestic fowl operation. While registration for backyard chicken owners has been voluntary in the past, this controversial new mandate is intended to help authorities track all possible targets. The database of contact information also simplifies the process of

Featured Data
Source: IEI Commons


Featured Report

Did you know that poultry is NC’s #1 ag product? Learn more.

Featured Video

Just to balance the fright, here’s a tongue-in-cheek view of the inherent dangers of raising backyard chickens. Nice that someone’s talking turkey about this issue - they’re a gateway livestock!
alerting registrants about nearby outbreaks.

These actions are in response to a recent national outbreak of the deadliest animal disease in US history. Nearly 50 million birds have been infected by avian flu in 15 states since December 2014 (see Figure 1), none of them in the Southeast. In April 2015, the disease plowed through Minnesota's industrial-scale turkey farms, affecting at least 3.6 million birds, and went on to inflict huge losses on Iowa's massive egg-producing facilities, claiming nearly 10 million hens. Activity has come to a standstill for now; at the time this article was written, the last reported detection was in June of this year.

Figure 1 source: United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (accessed September 23, 2015).

But experts fear cooler weather and seasonally migrating wild waterfowl could soon bring the virus to North Carolina. If avian flu spreads to the Southeast, poultry suppliers would be in big trouble (see Figure 2). Avian influenza virus infections are widespread in wild birds, especially migratory ducks in the major flyways, reports the UC Davis Veterinary Medicine Extension Office. For poultry, the virus means almost certain death. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) underscores the fact that avian flu has a 90-100 percent mortality rate.
How Would This Affect Our Food Supply?

The USDA assures that the chance of infected poultry entering the food chain is extremely low. Their highly pathogenic avian influenza response plan is designed to keep all infected birds out of the food supply. However, this latest avian flu epidemic certainly had significant repercussions. Last summer there were severe egg shortages and price spikes. In June, egg prices were up 72 percent from the previous month and suppliers expected shortages to last 18-24 months, according to CNBC.

Humans Are Not Thought to Be at Risk

Although avian influenza viruses normally do not infect humans, rare cases have been reported. Most human infections have occurred following close contact with infected poultry, causing mild to severe symptoms. However, no human cases of illness from this strain of bird flu virus have been reported, and the CDC currently considers it to be a low risk to humans.

The greater concern is that with every contact there is potential for humans to spread the virus by carrying it on their shoes, clothing, tools, or vehicles. While big poultry operations generally have biosecurity measures in place to protect from disease, many smaller outfits are still adapting to this hazard. Given the stakes, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) in the western mountain region recently canceled its popular annual Farm Tour. “The risk of inviting thousands of visitors to multiple farms...
during this time is too much of a threat to ignore,” explained Executive Director Charlie Jackson. “The potential spread of this disease could be devastating for commercial producers and backyard chicken flocks throughout the region.”

**What’s Scarier is the Economic Impact**

Sales of live poultry and other public shows have also been suspended, including the crowd-pleasing poultry exhibit at the NC State Fair in October. ASAP and other exhibitors are following the recommendation of North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) State Veterinarian Dr. Doug Meckes. “The response in other states has already cost U.S. taxpayers more than a half billion dollars,” he warned. “In addition, this disease has led to numerous job losses that hurt farm families and their communities.” These costs reflect the amount that the USDA has spent on response and indemnification, according to NCDA&CS Public Information Officer Jennifer Kendrick. She elaborated that the USDA puts this number at $950 million, spent between the first case in December 2014 and August 2015 in payments for birds that were destroyed in efforts to stop the spread of this virus. Kendrick also notes that the “USDA also is paying a lot of contract workers for work on depopulation and cleanup crews, reimbursing the states for their efforts, and also reimbursing farmers for some of the other costs associated with depopulation and cleanup.”

Based on these indicators, avian flu’s potential to harm North Carolina on multiple fronts should not be underestimated. Our strong farms, thriving local food economies, and healthy communities depend on vigilance and preventive action.

Barbara Steele  
Public Policy Intern  
blsteele@ncsu.edu  

![Barbara Steele](image)