

**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Search

Home

Academics

Research

Extension

News

International

Gov Relations

Development

Faculty/Staff Resources

About CFAES

Give Now

News: Ohio Poultry Owners Advised to Increase Biosecurity as Virus Spreads in Western U.S.

Feb. 16, 2015



photo: iStock

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Three worrisome strains of avian flu have been detected in birds out West. These viruses can cause serious disease in birds, and their appearance has prompted poultry veterinarians at The Ohio State University to recommend that Ohio's commercial producers and backyard chicken enthusiasts alike take precautions to protect their flocks.

The strains are related to a virus that circulated in Asia and Europe in 2014. In December 2014, they were detected in the [Pacific Migratory Bird Flyway](#), in Washington, Oregon, California, Utah, Idaho and Nevada. These viruses are classified as highly pathogenic, meaning they are extremely infectious and fatal for birds.

Migratory birds appear to be playing a role in spreading the virus, said [Mohamed El-Gazzar](#), poultry veterinarian for Ohio State University Extension. OSU Extension is the outreach arm of the [College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences](#).

It's important to note that these strains are not considered a human health concern, said El-Gazzar, who is also an assistant professor in the [College of Veterinary Medicine](#). This has been strictly an avian disease outbreak — human illness has never been reported in relation to this outbreak in North America, Europe or Asia, and poultry products such as chicken and turkey are safe to eat.

Still, producers and poultry owners should take all necessary measures to protect their birds, El-Gazzar said.

According to the [Ohio Poultry Association](#), the state's poultry industry, including egg, turkey and chicken production, is valued at \$786 million. Ohio ranks second in the nation in egg production and ninth nationally in turkey production.

Earlier this month, El-Gazzar and colleague [Richard Slemons](#), professor emeritus in the College of Veterinary Medicine, sent a notice to producers through Ohio State's [Ohio Veterinary Newsletter](#).

"The first thing is to try to avoid direct contact between any domestic or captive type of bird and wild migratory birds," El-Gazzar said. "Producers are generally very good about protecting their birds, but they need to be aware that there's an increased risk."

Backyard poultry owners should consider keeping their birds in enclosed covered runs for the next several months or until the threat from the viruses passes, he said.

Poultry owners should not be complacent about these viruses even though they have not been detected in the Midwest, El-Gazzar said.

Samples from wild birds collected during the recent hunting season have not yet been analyzed, and few additional samples will be collected until summer. So, although there is no evidence that these viruses might be circulating in Ohio, authorities can't be certain the Buckeye State is completely free of them, he said.

"Dr. Slemons has had a very successful program surveying the Mississippi and Central flyways for the past 20-25 years," El-Gazzar said, noting that Ohio is part of the Mississippi flyway. "He's the influenza surveillance expert, and even in his opinion, surveillance is always behind.

"So, while we don't think there are these highly pathogenic viruses in the Mississippi flyway, we don't really know for sure."

Anyone who keeps or breeds raptors should also be aware of these viruses, as they have been detected in birds of prey out West, too, El-Gazzar said.

Other precautions El-Gazzar recommends include:

- In addition to avoiding direct contact between migratory and domestic birds, it's important to prevent indirect contact, as well. "For example, if there's an open body of water nearby that attracts wild birds, don't go out, potentially step in fecal material, and then come back to your birds and transmit an infection," he said.
- Protect birds from other poultry populations. "We don't encourage mixing flocks, mixing ages or mixing species," El-Gazzar said. "Visitors to your bird flock, whether they're from the neighborhood or from other farms, are highly discouraged."
- Commercial producers or backyard poultry owners should boost insect and rodent control efforts. "Make sure your houses are animal-proof, so that raccoons, opossums or any varmints can't get in, and bird-proof so that wild birds can't get in." Such biosecurity measures also include keeping feed and water clean.

It's especially important to protect domestic birds from wild duck populations, El-Gazzar said, because they often don't show any signs of disease even if they are carrying the virus.

"If you're a poultry owner and have ducks and chickens and turkeys in the same flock, that is a highly risky situation," El-Gazzar said. "Particularly if ducks are involved, that requires increased biosecurity for the time being."

Even if poultry owners cannot isolate their flocks from migrating birds and other poultry species, it's at least important to be aware of the increased risk of the virus, El-Gazzar said.

"At the first sign of a problem, alert authorities so things can be checked out," he said. "If you notice increased mortality in an alarming manner, contact the Ohio Department of Agriculture. They will speak with you and determine if what you're seeing matches the pattern of the highly pathogenic influenza."

The animal disease hotline at ODA is 800-300-9755 or 614-728-6220.

Updates on the Pacific flyway avian influenza outbreak is online at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service website, at www.aphis.usda.gov. For additional information on poultry biosecurity measures, see the service's poultry biosecurity website at www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/birdbiosecurity/biosecurity/basicspoultry.htm. OSU Extension also has a fact sheet, Biosecurity for Poultry, online at ohioline.osu.edu/vme-fact/0009.html.

"We're not trying to scare anybody," El-Gazzar said. "Currently we don't have any problems with this group of viruses here in Ohio, that we know of.

"We're just saying be aware of the problems out west, which might represent some risk to the Ohio poultry producers and backyard poultry owners. Just be aware and do everything you can to protect your birds."

-30-

Writer(s):

Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu

Source(s):

Mohamed El-Gazzar
614-688-1074
el-gazzar.1@osu.edu