

Duck shooters have a significant role in recognising bird flu and reporting it

Avian Influenza or bird flu is one of the biggest agricultural and human health threats Australia faces. As recently seen throughout Asia and Eastern Europe, the H5N1 strain of the disease is of major concern.

One possible scenario of avian influenza (AI) H5N1 coming into Australia is through migratory birds. In order to mount an effective Australian response, ongoing vigilance and early reporting of signs of the disease is crucial. The immediate reporting of anything unusual such as large numbers of dead birds will ensure authorities can contain and eradicate the disease as quickly as possible.

Duck shooters, along with others, have a significant role in reporting the disease. The sooner veterinarians and authorities can contain a disease, the better chance industries such as the chicken meat and egg industries, have of keeping the disease away from their birds and ultimately, retaining their markets and livelihood. Combined, the chicken and egg industries are worth around \$4 billion annually to the Australian economy.

Avian influenza can infect a wide range of birds including ducks, geese, ibis, swans, chickens, turkeys, pheasants, partridges, quail, pigeons, guinea fowl and ostriches. Signs of the disease vary but commonly include a sudden drop in egg production, loss of appetite, diarrhoea and death. The signs vary depending on the strain of the virus and the age and species of the birds infected.

Many species of wild birds, especially waterfowl, carry the virus but generally show no signs of disease. Australia does not have migratory waterfowl with known flyways. The risk of waterfowl catching AI is posed when they mingle with shore birds and waders that come to Australia from Asia.

There have been five cases of bird flu in commercial poultry previously in Australia. All were the H7 subtype of the virus which can be a fatal disease to chickens. All five cases were successfully contained and eradicated with the last case being in 1997 at Tamworth in NSW. There were no known cases of human infection.

H5N1 can infect humans who come in close contact with infected birds or their excrement so it is important when handling and dressing birds that thorough hygiene practices are adopted. This includes using gloves, a face mask and also disinfecting hands, clothing and any equipment that comes into contact with birds.

It should also be noted that proper cooking of poultry will kill the disease but freezing will not. The disease can survive in water for many days, if not weeks, depending on temperature.

Despite the recent spread of AI from Asia to Europe, Australia is well prepared to respond to an outbreak. The Australian Government has been aware of this strain of the disease since its emergence in 1997 and again when it took hold in many Asian countries in 2003. Wild bird surveillance programs are also in place.

Well developed and tested plans exist to respond to both animal and plant disease emergencies. In November 2005, a national simulation took place to test both health and agriculture's integrated response capabilities to deal with an outbreak in Australia. Exercise Eleusis '05 involved industry, health and agriculture agencies with around 1,000 people participating throughout the country.

The results of such exercises allow both industry and the government to make improvements to their plans and response arrangements especially where there is new technology available.

At the forefront of Australia's disease protection is the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS). AQIS screens 100 per cent of all flights and luggage from high risk countries, paying particular attention to eggs, egg products, poultry meat, poultry vaccines, feathers and similar items. For the 2004-2005 financial year, AQIS has seized a total of 12.2 tonnes of bird products at airports and mail centres across Australia. All incoming international mail is screened along with cargo.

A wide variety of bird flu information is available to the public. The Australian Government website www.daff.gov.au/birdflu offers comprehensive information that has been written by Australian veterinarians. Additionally, the department of primary industries in your state or territory can be contacted for information specific to your region.

It cannot be stressed enough the importance of being **alert to the signs of AI while out in the field**. If you do come across something that looks even slightly unusual in bird populations, please report it to the **Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on freecall 1800 675 888**. Alternatively, report it to your local veterinarian or department of primary industries immediately!