

**Testimony before the U.S. House of
Representatives Committee on Agriculture,
Subcommittee on Livestock and Foreign
Agriculture**

**“Examination of Federal and State Response to
Avian Influenza”**

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Chairman Rouzer, Ranking Member Costa and Members of the Livestock Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the ongoing efforts of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) to prepare for and to develop capability to respond to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). First and foremost, please understand that in North Carolina, the Department has approached this task understanding that appropriate response is beyond the scope of any single entity in State government. From the beginning of this endeavor, the Veterinary Division has fully embraced our colleagues in the Department, in particular the staff of the Emergency Programs Division which includes both emergency responders and veterinarians who are uniquely qualified, through their training and experience, to address this disease. In addition, we have closely aligned ourselves with the Department's Environmental Programs lead who serves as the Department's liaison with the Soil and Water Conservation Division. We have also engaged colleagues within the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), including Solid Waste, Air and Water Quality and Confined Animal Feeding Operations Specialists. North Carolina's diverse topography, from the mountains to the coast, necessitates consideration of environmental impacts of every aspect of response activity should we experience unprecedented mass mortality.

Other partners in the Department – Marketing, Forestry, and the Food and Drug Laboratory have been included in varying degrees as well. Outside of NCDA&CS, we have engaged with the poultry industry, our Federal Partners, North Carolina State University, the Cooperative Extension Service, NC Department of Labor, NC Department of Transportation, NC Public Health and State Emergency Management in our efforts to assure a unified approach to potential disease outbreak. NC Emergency Management has agreed to handle all HPAI logistical support at the state and local level.

The Department's preparedness efforts began in earnest, after requests for disease management assistance were received from the state of Minnesota in March; we immediately responded and deployed depopulation teams to support Minnesota's efforts. During the early April period, the Midwest experienced an unprecedented increase in numbers of HPAI-infected premises. According to the State Veterinarian of Minnesota and USDA officials, existing resources were overwhelmed, leading to a backlog in depopulation and disposal needs. During three additional deployments, North Carolina response teams traveled to Minnesota and Iowa to assist those states in the depopulation of infected birds. Recent USDA epidemiological reports indicate that the presence of this "backlog" of infected birds contributed to the lateral spread of the virus in several areas; however, by the time of our team's return to North Carolina, the "backlog" of infected birds had been managed.

These deployment experiences became the cornerstones for preparedness efforts in North Carolina. Over the past three months, we have established Work Groups to address many of the lessons learned during deployments. Those groups include: operations, biosecurity, laboratory capacity, disposal, decontamination and disinfection, communications, outreach and permitting. Internally, the Emergency Programs Division, the Veterinary Division and Environmental Programs staff are fully engaged in every aspect of the Working Groups; our external partners are also participating in each of these areas.

The Laboratory Capacity group is collaborating with the North Carolina Veterinary Laboratory Diagnostic System's four state laboratories which will be a critical component in the response efforts. These facilities provide the first line of defense and have the capability to diagnose highly pathogenic avian influenza virus and perform tests required for movement of poultry to maintain the flow of commerce. The Communications Group developed messaging early in the process to ensure consistent information to the public; that information is posted on the NCDA&CS web site and is available for public reference. The Outreach group has worked across a spectrum of players to ensure timely release of information. Significant amongst this group is the State's Cooperative Extension Service; they are "on the ground" on a daily basis and have close working relationships with both small and large producers and back yard poultry owners. North Carolina also reached out early to special avian collections and created an annex to our HPAI Response Plan. Special Avian collections include birds of special value due to their endangered status or exotic birds on display to the public such as those in the NC Zoo in Asheboro.

Four working Groups have been focused on specific operational aspects of response, to include Biosecurity, Depopulation, Disposal and Decontamination. These working groups include a variety of subject matter experts.

As previously noted, the delay in depopulation is believed to have been significant to the lateral spread of the virus in the Midwest. We are determined that inadequate depopulation capability will not cause similar problems in North Carolina. The Department has long conducted training sessions for staff and others in the use of our North Carolina foaming equipment, typically twice a month, in the eastern and the western part of the state. More recently, the Department conducted Foam Training for industry partners and interested parties from other states on two successive days. Three Regional Meetings (eastern, central, and western North Carolina) were held for industry and agency partners to discuss preparations for a robust response to HPAI emerging from the Atlantic flyway this fall.

Breaches of biosecurity documented in the current United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Epidemiologic Report are believed to have contributed to lateral spread of the virus. During response activities, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) personnel observed sharing of equipment between infected and non-infected farms, employees moving between infected and non-infected farms, lack of cleaning and disinfection of vehicles moving between farms, and rodents or small wild birds inside poultry houses. APHIS is compiling their observations and will present those findings in a final report. Stringent biosecurity will be paramount to preventing lateral spread. Our goal in North Carolina is "No Lateral Spread" and to accomplish this, the Biosecurity lead on each positive farm will ensure compliance with biosecurity procedures by our team members, all grower staff, and for all movements on and off the premise.

Since North Carolina grower facilities are typically in much closer proximity to one another than in states which have already been affected, there is a greater need for comprehensive biosecurity practices to reduce the risk of HPAI spread. Consider, for example, some identified 10 kilometer Control Areas in North Carolina's Animal Health Data Base have over 500 individual poultry houses within the perimeter. Given that all movement between farms and

within farms need to be conducted under the assumption that the disease may be present, the biosecurity mechanism is monumental, but doable.

Disposal is another critical tenet of the Department's response effort. Given constraints on burial throughout much of North Carolina and limitations on landfills and rendering facilities, composting is recommended as the first choice for management of poultry carcasses as has been the case throughout the Midwest. The compost disposal method is also a preferred biosecurity measure in that no diseased birds need to leave the farm. Rapid establishment of mortality compost windrows on site is key to disposal of birds and inactivation of the influenza virus. Timely and effective composting also aims to minimize "down time" for the impacted farms to the extent possible.

The Disposal Work Group is actively pursuing the identification of various carbon sources across the State that are of appropriate type and of sufficient quantity to develop effective compost recipes on each infected premise. The Work Group is also in the process of developing guidance for land application of finished compost for agronomic use as a soil amendment with "fertilizer" value. Additionally, the Workgroup has planned a composting demonstration associated with Commissioner Troxler's annual Food Safety Forum in August. The Department's Incident Management team will create a working "mortality compost pile" near the meeting location for growers from around the State to attend.

Finally, the economic impact of a catastrophic mass mortality disease outbreak in North Carolina could/would have profound implications for counties, regions, and even the entire State. The North Carolina poultry industry is responsible for as much as \$34 billion in total economic activity and creates/supports as many as 109,000 jobs. For each \$100 million loss in North Carolina poultry farm and poultry processing industries, total state spending falls by \$230,000 million, total income in the state falls by \$68.8 million, total labor earnings fall by \$44.6 million and total employment falls by 1,010 jobs. We've already seen that Minnesota and Iowa have realized a \$1 billion economic loss associated with HPAI infection on 180 premises. As many as 500 premises nationwide could be affected this fall.

North Carolina has a long-standing commitment to agriculture and has responded to and recovered from agriculture disasters in the past – drought, disease and weather events, but HPAI is unprecedented in its potential to impact our state and the entire Southeast. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services and its partners are committed to preparing for and responding to HPAI, should it arrive on the wings of migratory birds this fall, and we are at the ready to quickly and effectively manage the disease to the best of our ability, incorporating the latest USDA lessons learned. If successful, we will minimize impact on the North Carolina poultry industry, its growers, our economy, and the citizens of our state.

I am prepared to answer any questions you might have.