U.S. House of Representatives
Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry Subcommittee of the Agriculture Committee
Annette B Jones, DVM Testimony for July 15, 2025 Hearing on *Safeguarding.U¡S¡.Agriculture¿ The.Role.of.the.National.Animal.Health.Laboratory.Network.(NAHLN)*

- Thank you for including me in this hearing today. My long tenure as a State Veterinarian has provided me with extensive real-world experience. I have seen effective and less effective strategies and am very familiar with the critical infrastructure that must be in place to mitigate impacts of catastrophic disease outbreaks.
- To provide some context, I think of myself as a "Fire Chief" and our disease control experts are deployed to contain outbreaks, much like containing an almost invisible fire. We are emergency responders, and our strategies are practiced but modified to reflect the *specific* situation in front of us. State and federal partners work side by side and decisions are made in unified command. Like fighting fire, our actions like euthanizing entire flocks or halting movement needed to maintain business, can be devastating to some, but are necessary to minimize the negative impacts on *all* the nation's herds or flocks.
- Continuing the analogy, the National Animal Health Laboratory Network exists to *detect* new pathogens that threaten our food system, animal health, or public health. It is like the "smoke detector" that alerts all potentially impacted animal owners and first responders to a problem early enough to reduce losses. This critical detection system also accurately tells us field responders "what is in front of us" so we can modify our strategy.
- **That brings me to my first point.** We as a nation and as farmers and ranchers need the "smoke detector" so that even if the "fire department" is delayed or overwhelmed, we know there is a problem and can act to protect our employees and animals.
- **This also brings me to my second point.** Given the weight of regulatory response decisions, testing must be accurate, consistent, and timely. That means we must have a Laboratory Network with surge capacity, consistent methods, and robust quality control at ALL member labs. The test results must stand up to scrutiny.
- For example, last winter we were challenged in California with over 760 H5N1 infected dairies and 68 poultry outbreak control zones. Normally our CA Lab tests about 450 samples/month for influenza. At the peak of this recent outbreak, the sample load was 12,000 samples/month, which is more than 25 times the normal workload.
- Over those four months, the Lab Network deployed pairs of technicians from other labs to California to help with testing. Because these technicians performed the same test on the same equipment using the same SOP at their home lab, they were able to immediately expand our lab capacity. At the height of the outbreak, besides fully utilizing the CA Lab, Network Labs in 7 other states received, processed, and electronically reported, accurate, almost real-time results.
- **My last point** is more specific to our way out of the current H5N1 outbreak. I believe we must sustain three concerted efforts, and if even one is neglected, the other two will fail.
    1. **On-going testing**. Through active surveillance we will detect mutations and exposure levels or "prevalence" so we can take informed actions to protect animals and people. Note that Network laboratories have provided over a million test results nationwide in response to the current outbreak. But as I just alluded, testing alone will not make a virus "disappear" or get us out of this outbreak.

2. **Biosecurity is also needed,** meaning actions like movement control, traffic control, PPE, sanitation, and decontamination. When viral load in the environment is below a certain threshold, we know that biosecurity is by far the best tool for preventing disease. But I have seen time and time again that even the best farm biosecurity will be overwhelmed if there is too much virus being produced by surrounding poultry, wild birds, cows, etc. So again, biosecurity alone will not work if environmental viral load is not managed.
3. **Bringing us to the third effort – reducing virus in environment** – Currently we do this the hard way: by euthanizing infected flocks and by allowing dairy immunity to develop after exposure. Dairy exposure means a huge percent of the herd suffers through bloody, snotty noses; aborted pregnancies; no interest in food and water; and udders that dry up. This is not a path most herd managers ever want to travel. And poultry producers now must use biosecurity to defend their flock not only from other infected flocks and wild birds, but also from dairies that may be actively infected for months. Note that of the 17 states with known infected dairy cows, 12 have experienced poultry cases directly from these herds.

- I believe we need dairy vaccination in the toolbox *yesterday*, especially for regions currently free from disease. If I were a poultry producer, beef producer, swine producer, or dairy producer, I would be banging my fist on the table to vaccinate dairy cattle way ahead of poultry. If USDA can successfully keep trade doors open when millions of dairy cows are actively infected with H5N1, I am confident that they can get the job done if we use vaccine *selectively* to protect these girls.

- Again, thank you for inviting me to be a part of this hearing today. This subject is one that is very important to me and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Not in comments, but information to have available:

- Annual funding for the NAHLN is about $25M to ensure that 64 labs across the US have the skills, equipment, capability, and capacity to test for catastrophic diseases. These labs are held to the highest standards to ensure that results stand up to scrutiny and can be relied upon for critical decisions. $25M is a drop in the bucket when you look at the cost of an outbreak.
- The current HPAI outbreak has cost USDA almost $2B. Without early disease detection and accurate test results to make rapid decisions, the expense and the toll on animals and people would be much higher. To use the fire analogy, you don't save money by eliminating the smoke detectors -- you get bigger and more damaging fires.
- An outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) could cost $200 billion just to U.S. animal, corn, and soybean agriculture industries. This loss translates into roughly 154,000 jobs over the course of the outbreak. Whatever we can do at the front end to

detect disease and implement control strategies as early as possible is worth it. FMD modelling and planning clearly points out the need for the NAHLN and vaccination.

- NAHLN exists to provide nationwide surge capacity for livestock and poultry outbreaks, and to ensure accurate, consistent, and timely results from all labs in the system.