

**Statement of
David Will, General Manager
Chino Valley Ranchers
Before the
Subcommittee on Livestock and Foreign Agriculture
House Committee on Agriculture
July 16, 2019**

Chairman Costa, Ranking Member Rouzer and distinguished members of the subcommittee: My name is David Will and since 2001 I have been the general manager of Chino Valley Ranchers, a third-generation family owned and operated business with five farms in Southern California. Chino Valley Ranchers employs 330 people and also sources eggs from over 150 family farms in seven other states. In addition to representing egg farms in California, I'm honored today to speak on behalf of the Pacific Egg and Poultry Association as well as United Egg Producers, whose members account for about 90 percent of all eggs produced in the United States.

The egg industry appreciates the subcommittee's invitation to testify. We are honored to be here with other commodity groups representing animal agriculture. All of us face multiple challenges, but the biggest challenges come from sources we can't see: animal health threats such as avian influenza and virulent Newcastle Disease.

This subcommittee will recall the devastation that egg farmers and other poultry producers endured in the highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreaks of 2014 and 2015. This catastrophe cost taxpayers around \$1 billion, but the economic impact on affected producers, their workers and local communities was substantially more than that, according to independent estimates. More recently, my state of California has suffered the effects of virulent Newcastle disease. We hope we are at the end of that outbreak, which had an impact on more than 1.2 million head of poultry in three states. There are several lessons to be learned from these and other disease outbreaks.

First, biosecurity is all-important. Our industry already had extremely tight biosecurity, but we have doubled down since the HPAI outbreaks. Unfortunately, as California's experience with vND has shown, biosecurity can be undermined by backyard poultry flocks located near commercial operations. During the outbreak, it has not been uncommon to find 20 or more positive backyard flocks within a kilometer of commercial producers. In addition, our ability to combat vND was compromised by social media networks that warned of the approach of enforcement officials and encouraged people to move or hide potentially affected birds. More broadly, we have continuing problems with trespassers, often animal activists, who break into our operations and sometimes remove birds, compromising the biosecurity of the remaining flock and sometimes requiring euthanasia to prevent disease spread.

Second, the impact of disease outbreaks is not only the losses to affected producers, but the trade impacts that are often felt by entire industries. USDA has done a great job of encouraging our trading partners to regionalize their response to outbreaks, meaning they restrict only imports from regions directly affected by the disease. But not all trading partners respect these science-based practices, and trade suffers as a result.

Third, both response and – most important – prevention require a joint effort by the private and public sectors. Our industry learned many lessons from the HPAI outbreak, but so did our federal and state partners. I think they would acknowledge they are better prepared now than they were then.

Fortunately, Congress has recognized the need for joint efforts. We commend Congress, and in particular this subcommittee, for the mandatory funding provided to animal health in the 2018 farm bill. We along with our colleagues in animal agriculture strongly supported the new Animal Disease Prevention and Management Program. We support all three of its components. We do want to emphasize that the pest and disease prevention program, including its cooperative agreements with states, should not be short-changed. The vaccine bank is important, but it is not the only part of the new program. The prevention program as well as animal health laboratories are critical components as well. Actually, our vND experience is a good illustration. What was needed there was not vaccine but boots on the ground – a fast response team that included both USDA and the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

In the area of avian health, everyone agrees that highly pathogenic AI should be prevented, but if outbreaks occur despite our best efforts, emergency funds under the Commodity Credit Corporation are an appropriate response. We also believe that USDA should use CCC funds for indemnities, virus elimination and other costs of low-pathogenic AI outbreaks. History shows us that LPAI can and does mutate into HPAI. For that reason, stamping out the disease when it occurs is extremely important, and justifies the use of CCC funds.

In a similar way, USDA has used CCC funds to respond to vND in California and other states. We commend the department for tapping those funds, and encourage USDA to continue its aggressive response to this disease in partnership with industry and state officials. Early detection is key. We need to keep the dialogue open between the show bird community and commercial producers.

Finally, we support the establishment of objective and equitable payment rates for the costs involved in animal disease outbreaks. In particular, we have had serious concerns about USDA's proposals for payment rates for virus elimination, that is, the costs of ensuring that an avian influenza virus is completely eliminated from an affected egg farm. We've shown in detailed comments that USDA has used unrealistic and outdated numbers in these calculations. Similarly, we have also encouraged USDA to review how it calculates indemnities that are paid to affected producers for the value of their lost production. We believe the cost of leaving facilities idle for an extended period of time after an outbreak, which is often required by USDA, should be taken into account in calculating indemnities. The type of eggs and the regions where they are produced should also be taken into account where they have different market values.

None of this takes away from the high regard in which we hold USDA's animal health efforts. We work in partnership with APHIS as well as state agencies, and we find them highly professional and genuinely concerned about farm families, their employees, animal welfare and the impact on local communities.

Although today's hearing has a focus on animal health, the subcommittee is well aware that producers face numerous other challenges. While I realize that immigration is not generally within your jurisdiction, I could not appear before you without stressing the need for an immigration policy that allows us to have a stable, reliable and legal labor force. Current guest-worker laws focus on seasonal employment, whereas we need to care for our birds 365 days of the year. We appreciate the efforts of many Members to address the labor needs of animal agriculture.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.