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New Primer Advises Small-Scale Farmers on Avian Flu Risks **Free Range Poultry Farmers Have Unique Advantages and Challenges**

Minneapolis - The rapid spread of avian flu across Asia and Europe has heightened concerns that the disease will arrive in North America soon. By acting now, small-scale poultry farmers in the U.S. can reduce the risk to their operation of contracting the disease, according to a new primer by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

Dead Birds Don't Fly: An Avian Flu Primer for Small-Scale Farmers, by Lindsey Hillesheim, Ph.D., educates farmers with free-range or pasture poultry operations about the basic biology of avian influenza in birds and humans to help evaluate the risk of an avian flu infection in their flocks. Although every farm is unique and its response will be different, this primer offers a basic description of H5N1 Avian flu, how it can spread, how to reduce risks of infection of poultry and workers, and appropriate responses in the event of an outbreak. The primer can be found at: www.iatp.org.

“Free-range and organic poultry have an advantage over their caged-raised counterparts in regards to the resilience of their immune systems,” said Steve Suppan, Ph.D., IATP’s Director of Research. “Free-range birds are constantly exposed to low levels of pathogens that naturally reside in the environment and this exposure further strengthens their immune system. Many of the poultry lines employed by free-range farmers have been bred to live outdoors and resist infection.” By contrast, avian influenza spread quickly among confined, immune system weakened poultry in large operations in Thailand, which were reported to have slaughtered infected poultry for sale, rather than report the infection to authorities.

Avian influenza, or bird flu, has spread rapidly throughout Asia and is now appearing in northern Africa and parts of Europe. This particular avian flu virus (H5N1) is highly lethal and contagious in domestic poultry. It has decimated entire flocks of several thousand birds in days. Currently, bird flu does not infect humans easily, and has not transmitted easily between humans. But of 184 reported human cases of the H5N1 virus, 103 have led to death. Public health officials are concerned that as the H5N1 virus has more contact with humans, it will eventually acquire the ability to more easily infect and spread between humans. Should this happen, the virus could spark the next flu pandemic.

The rapid spread of avian flu is of particular concern to small independent poultry farmers, specifically those with free-range or pastured operations. How avian flu has spread has not been firmly established. One of the leading theories is that migratory birds, particularly waterfowl, are responsible for carrying the virus to other countries. However, the spread of avian flu has not matched known migratory bird patterns in all cases. Others believe the disease has spread largely through poorly regulated confined-poultry operations that transport birds and eggs throughout the world through a multitude of channels.

Thus far, government officials in several countries, including France, Austria, Nigeria and Sweden, have enacted various outdoor-poultry bans in an attempt to prevent contact with infected wild migrating birds. But confinement of free-range and pastured birds in the U.S. does not appear necessary at this time.

“Well-informed and executed farm management practices are our first line of defense against reducing the risk of avian influenza in poultry, and very rapidly controlling infection if it occurs, before it can spread to humans. This primer is intended to help small-scale poultry producers to remove hazards and change management practices that increase risk of infection. Knowledge about the disease and how to avoid it, will help farmers better represent their interests in local, state, and federal planning for avian influenza outbreaks,” said Suppan.

The primer outlines concrete steps that small-scale farmers can take to prevent the spread of avian flu by better protecting workers, animals, and materials. The primer also includes suggestions for protecting farm workers in the event of an outbreak and how to address various large-scale responses such as mass culling and vaccination.

“Mass culling has been a frequent but indiscriminate response in slowing the spread of the disease,” said Suppan. “However, there may be steps producers can take, such as quarantining, testing, and vaccination, which could avoid the wholesale culling of their flock. Well-informed farmers will be best positioned to know whether and how they can avoid culling, if avian flu appears in the U.S.”

The full report can be found at: iatp.org.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works globally to promote resilient family farms, communities and ecosystems through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.

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