

County declares a state of emergency for bird flu outbreak

By Ryan Whisner With AP reports | Posted: Friday, April 24, 2015 8:47 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County has declared a state of emergency following an outbreak of the deadly bird flu virus at two sites within the county.

The H5 avian influenza virus was first detected in Wisconsin at a commercial chicken flock of 180,000 egg-laying chickens in Jefferson County on Monday, April 13.

The virus subsequently was detected at a second Jefferson County site which houses 800,000 chickens.

On Monday, April 20, Gov. Scott Walker declared a state of emergency and authorized the Wisconsin National Guard to assist authorities responding to the bird flu in Jefferson, Chippewa, Juneau and Barron counties.

Since the confirmed presence of highly-pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in Wisconsin, state and federal agencies have been working alongside organization and industry partners to minimize the impact and eliminate the disease.

The deadly virus was detected in a 90,000-turkey flock in Barron County Thursday.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection says that is the sixth report of bird flu in the state in 10 days.

Nearly 1.3 million birds are affected including 980,000 chickens in Jefferson County.

DATCP Spokeswoman Raechelle Cline says initial tests show it is an H5 virus, but results still are pending to confirm whether it's the same H5N2 virus that has struck commercial poultry farms across the Midwest.

“We don't foresee this ending,” Cline said. “We don't want it to happen but we expect that it will.”

While lethal to domestic poultry, the strain of virus detected is not known to have caused disease in humans and is not expected to pose a risk to public health or the food supply.

However, a ban on movement of poultry or poultry products including chickens, turkeys, eggs, manure, wastewater and shells has been enacted in Jefferson, Juneau, Barron and Chippewa counties.

Any movements to shows, swap meets and exhibitions also is prohibited within Jefferson County until May 31. Cline says the ban will be extended if necessary.

Currently, state officials are hoping for an extended period of warmer, dry weather to help inactivate the virus and minimize further spread, at least for now.

Multiple outbreaks of avian influenza have occurred most recently in Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Arkansas, the Dakotas and Kansas.

There are four confirmed, and two unconfirmed, cases of the H5N2 virus in Wisconsin. There are two outbreaks in

Barron and Jefferson counties, and one each in Chippewa and Juneau counties.

The flu was found at two turkey farms — one with 126,000 turkeys and another with 90,000 turkeys — in Barron County and a small, mixed-bird backyard flock of 40 mixed breed birds in Juneau County and a flock of 87,000 turkeys in Chippewa County which Hormel Foods Corp. confirmed is owned by its Jennie-O Turkey Store division.

Wisconsin is home to more than 5.4 million chickens that lay eggs, according to DATCP.

The two Jefferson County outbreaks affect almost a million of those chickens.

All birds in the infected flocks that don't die from the flu will be killed.

Specific sites are not being identified as a matter of disease management and containment.

Cline said people coming out to the infected sites could cause bigger problems by bringing the disease to their residences or farms.

The chickens in the first egg-laying facility in Jefferson County are in the process of being euthanized by using carbon dioxide containers.

Cline pointed out that is a slower and more intensive process.

She noted that the Wisconsin National Guard personnel are assisting with the response to the first detection in Jefferson County.

The 14 Guard members deployed to the site are assisting with cleaning and disinfection of large vehicles and equipment leaving the site. They have specialized training in this function and are not involved directly in the depopulation efforts on the farm.

Meanwhile, Daybreak Foods Inc. issued a press release Thursday confirming that the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS) had confirmed the presence of avian influenza at one of its Wisconsin locations in Jefferson County.

"This is a very difficult time for our family and our teammates," President William Rehm said. "Daybreak Foods is serious about our commitment to a safe work environment, and the health and welfare of our hens. Together, our dedicated team works hard to produce a safe and affordable food."

Rehm said the company would work closely with the state and federal regulatory officials, noting that the egg-laying facility with 60 employees will become productive again after a difficult and emotional cleanup process is finished that will include euthanizing all 800,000 chickens.

"It's unfortunate and we feel bad for the animals and we feel for our team members at that location that they have to work through this process with us. It's not a good deal for anybody," he said.

"Daybreak continues to be committed to the health and welfare of our stakeholders and hens while continuing to produce a safe and affordable egg supply," he said.

"It's a challenge for our industry. These are difficult times," Rehm said. "You never like to see anything happen to our hens. Their health and welfare are on our minds every day, whether they are ... at one of our facilities in

Wisconsin or any of our facilities that are producing eggs.”

Daybreak’s Lake Mills facility immediately started testing its flock every day for the virus after the company learned another Jefferson County facility tested positive for the virus about 10 days ago, Rehm said. Every test turned up negative until they found dead birds earlier this week, he added.

“We always run a very biosecure environment around all our complexes,” Rehm said. “We have very limited access, we work very closely with all our team members to make sure we’re running our proper precautions every day. As the avian flu elevated in the turkey flocks in Minnesota, we elevated our biosecurity and continued to elevate the precautions when the first flock in Wisconsin broke positive. We were as tight as tight can be. We put a perimeter around it. But if it comes in through the air, at this point there’s no protection.”

Rehm said a possible vaccine offers some hope of stopping or slowing the virus but there isn’t a broad-spectrum vaccine on the horizon to stop all of the potential high-pathogen strains that could affect the industry. He also said countries that import U.S.poultry products may not approve of any vaccination programs.

“It’s more than saying, ‘Let’s give them injections and move on.’ I think there are other potential solutions we may have to look at as we move down the path here,” Rehm said.

The virus is expected to slow with warmer temperatures later this spring but return again in fall when the birds migrate south and temperatures cool. So poultry industry officials are in a hurry to find a way to stop the fecal material from getting inside the facilities, Rehm said.

“It’s hard to say how long it’s going to take us as an industry to find an economical way to filter the air in the barn so we prevent the particulate matter from entering the facility with microscopic forms of bacteria on it,” Rehm said. “It’s not like putting a filter on your furnace. It’s a much more complex and larger issue than that. Can we do it by this fall? I honestly don’t know.”

Those employees will help the USDA and DATCP with the clean-up operation, too, Rehm said. “Hopefully we can get up and going as fast as we can.”

Cline said the evaluation currently is under way as to what needs to be done next.

“We are working with the producer (Daybreak) to acquire the necessary equipment to complete the depopulation,” she said.

Loss of the birds can be a costly one for the affected farm owners.

Cline said federal reimbursement is provided for any birds that must be killed due to the disease. No compensation is given for natural die-offs, and she did not know how many birds already might have died.

Tests had been completed at Daybreak as part of the surveillance from the original outbreak discovered in Jefferson County on April 13.

Cline noted that further surveillance testing in a six-mile radius from the Daybreak site likely will not be completed until into next week because existing testing crews are doing other surveillance testing at other sites in the state.

Any time a site is identified to have an infected flock, the property immediately is quarantined and neighboring properties with poultry are notified about the situation.

Affected birds die quickly. And once an infection is confirmed at a farm, all surviving birds typically are killed to prevent the disease from spreading.

Cline explained that the carcasses then are composted, usually in the same barn where they died.

The heat generated by composting is enough to kill flu viruses and other pathogens commonly present in poultry, such as salmonella. The compost then can be safely spread as fertilizer.

Following USDA protocols, surveillance and testing procedures will take place at properties near the affected facility to ensure the virus has not spread.

Backyard poultry owners and other poultry producers are encouraged to practice good biosecurity, and to take steps that prevent contact between their birds and wild birds. Owners are encouraged to monitor their flocks closely and report sick or dead birds to DATCP at 1-800-572-8981.