

Officials lift bird-flu quarantine zone around Jefferson County chicken farms

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MADISON — Agriculture officials have lifted a quarantine zone around three Jefferson County farms where thousands of chickens were infected with bird flu.

The H5 avian influenza virus first was detected in Wisconsin at a commercial chicken flock in Jefferson County on April 13, and two more county sites shortly thereafter.

Since the first detection, the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection successfully implemented a coordinated response with the facility owners, U.S. Department of Agriculture and other state agencies to contain and eliminate the disease at those sites. The affected farms were quarantined immediately and the 1.1 million birds in the flocks were “depopulated” or destroyed.

However, while the control zone quarantines have been lifted, the infected farms themselves remain quarantined until further notice. Officials reported that they must undergo a cleaning and disinfection process before being released from quarantine and authorized to repopulate their flocks.

“This is the third control zone quarantine release that we’ve done, but as long as positive flocks are still being reported in states to our west, we still need to be closely watching birds for signs of illness,” said Dr. Paul McGraw, Wisconsin state veterinarian. “As long as this virus might still be in the environment, it could be problematic.”

The 10 Wisconsin flocks affected by the virus totaled 1,765,008 birds, including 1,112,970 chickens and 652,005 turkeys. All of the sites in Jefferson County involved chickens.

Gov. Scott Walker declared a state of emergency on April 20 and authorized the Wisconsin National Guard to assist authorities responding to the bird flu in Jefferson, Chippewa, Juneau and Barron counties. Jefferson County followed up with its own declaration of a state of emergency on April 24.

Among the farms impacted by the disease was Daybreak Foods facility. Previously, company officials indicated that if everything fell into place, the Daybreak Foods facility could be repopulated by July of 2016.

While a cause for the bird flu has not been determined, a prevailing theory has emerged from some experts. Migrating waterfowl, such as geese or ducks, are suspected of transmitting it to turkeys and chickens through direct or indirect contact, the latter including the infected bird’s droppings.

The virus has been contained thus far to domestic chickens and turkeys, leading to speculation that the migrating waterfowl are carriers of the disease, but are resistant to it. All tests for the H5 strain on wild birds have been negative.

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.

Officials said that all bird owners, whether commercial producers or backyard enthusiasts, need to continue practicing good biosecurity, preventing contact between their birds and wild birds, and reporting sick birds or unusual bird deaths to a veterinarian and the DATCP's Animal Health division at 1-800-572-8981.

Additional information and resources concerning avian influenza can be found on DATCP's web site at datcp.wi.gov.