Avian flu remains threat, county told

By Ryan Whisner Union regional editor | Posted: Wednesday, September 23, 2015 9:55 am

BIRD FLU

BIRD FLU — Jefferson County hosted an informational session on avian influenza Tuesday after the severe outbreak this past spring. State and county officials are cautioning area poultry owners to be aware of the potential for a renewed outbreak this fall.

JEFFERSON — Future outbreaks of avian flu could be on the horizon during the next three to five years, according to Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection officials.

An informational session on the H5N2 strain of avian influenza that devastated some Midwestern farms this past spring was held Tuesday at the University of Wisconsin-Extension office in Jefferson County. A panel featuring a DATCP representative, a UW-Extension poultry specialist and a Jefferson County egg-laying farm owner spoke about this past spring's outbreak and the future of the virus.

They explained that outbreaks of what is commonly called bird flu actually started in Oregon, Washington and California in December 2014 to January 2015. Gradually, positive tests were received from sites further east.

DATCP Bureau of Field Services director Melinda Mace said the first commercial chicken flock that tested positive in Wisconsin was Nature Link Farm in the Jefferson County Town of Aztalan. A positive test was received for HPAI H5N2 avian influenza on April 9 from a Missouri lab. Confirmation was made from the USDA labs by April 11.

From that point, there were one to two sites infected per week until the final confirmation of a positive test on May 5.

Ultimately, Mace said, there were six turkey facilities, three chicken facilties (all in Jefferson County) and one backyard flock in Juneau County that had confirmed cases of the flu.

The 10 Wisconsin flocks affected by the virus — including five in Barron County, three in Jefferson and one each in Juneau and Chippewa counties — totaled 1,765,008 birds, including 1,112,970 chickens and 652,005 turkeys. All of the sites in Jefferson County involved chickens.

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 birds' 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 yet resistant to it.

All tests for the H5 strain on wild birds have been negative.

Heading into the fall with cooler temperatures, Mace noted, the understanding is that should an outbreak occur as the migratory birds head south, the virus will not die as it gets cooler.

The top 20 poultry-producing states are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. Of those, only portions of California, Iowa and Minnesota have been impacted.

She pointed out that if the avian flu heads east and south, then all those places might have some infected bird. To date, avian flu has not impacted broiler chicken farms, as they did the egg-laying operations and the turkeys.

Mace remains optimistic that officials will be more prepared than before should another outbreak occur.

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

A vaccine has been developed for the avian flu and has been conditionally approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for use in dealing with emergencies. However, the definition of "emergency" has not been determined.

Mace said that issues related to international trade have slowed any distribution of the vaccine in order to prevent rejection of export of poultry products to various countries.

Mace also reviewed how the federal, state and county officials responded to the outbreak.

Upon learning of a confirmed positive test, she said, officials immediately contacted the facility, which was then quarantined.

Also, she said, the indemnification and epidemiological analysis process was initiated quickly to allow the government to pay for any of the birds it would kill.

"The government will only pay for those that are alive and ... this virus kills very fast, so we have to get out there very quickly, get a good feel for what is there and what's the value of what's there

so we can initiate those processes and then we can depopulate once we have an agreement from everyone," Mace added.

A total of $8.6 million was paid out in indemnity in Wisconsin. Overall, a total of 232 sites were infected across the United States with more than $48 million paid out.

"In these commercial facilities, a consequence that didn't get a whole lot of attention is that suddenly you have a bunch of people unemployed," Mace said. "There are no birds, so there is nothing for (the employees) to do. Not only are they unemployed, but they are unemployable in their chosen line of work because no one wants them on their site because they come from an infected facility."

Due to a general lack of expertise in poultry, the USDA often was able to contract with the producers themselves, paying employees for their expertise and assistance.

At the time of the original avian flu outbreak, DATCP officials established two zones around any outbreak site: three-kilometer quarantine zone and seven- to 10-kilometer radius that was under surveillance or a control zone.

Mace said any facilities with poultry within those zones were contacted and the animals were tested.

Commercial sites within the zones were required to have two negative tests within 24 hours to allow for movement of product during the outbreak.

The affected farms were quarantined immediately and the 1.1 million birds in the flocks were "depopulated" or destroyed.

For disposal, Mace said, the birds' carcases were composted on site except for the backyard flock.

Per state regulations, the compost had to reach 130 degrees for seven days before being flipped and then heated again for another week.

Prior to beginning repopulation, each site had to undergo a cleaning and disinfection process to ensure there was no live virus still present.

The final site was released and made eligible to restock on Aug. 8.

Nature Link Farm and the two Daybreak Foods sites in Jefferson County that were infected and the other six locations in Wisconsin are within the Mississippi flyway, where this strain of avian influenza has previously been identified.

"We were doing a lot of things preparing for it because the turkey industry had been getting hit with it pretty hard especially in Minnesota," Nature Link Farm owner Scott Schneider said.

“You always think that it just can’t happen here. It is so unrealistic; lightning can’t strike here. It certainly can and it did.”

He noted that all it takes is enough virus on a head of a pin to enter a complex and wipe out every bird.

“I found out that it acts very quickly,” he said.

Within six days of first noticing something wrong within one of his five flocks, the entire flock was dead, he said.

“It is a very fast-acting virus and it is one of the most horrible things I’ve seen in my life,” Schneider said, noting that incubation for the virus was only five to 10 days.

He called it a contact virus, meaning it can attach itself to things including people, vehicles and other animals.

Schneider said those are the types of things Nature Link Farm now is looking at in terms of the biosecurity programs and protocols it will be using in the future.

“What we’re doing is doubling down to try and control the various functions on our farm,” Schneider said.

Now, he said, all vehicular traffic is stopped halfway down the driveway to ensure it has been cleaned or has no organic materials on it.

Then, it is sprayed with disinfectant.

Further, Schneider said, there are strict equipment protocols to be followed, so anything shared between buildings goes through a disinfectant process.

Employees will undergo a similar process at a Danish entry being constructed. Designed as a biosecurity entrance, it has a “dirty” side and a “clean” side on which employees wil change from street clothes into site-only clothes.

Schneider said one shuttle vehicle will transport employees to the complex area.

Looking back on the outbreak, Schneider had high praise for the various government agencies that responded.

“I certainly appreciate that because if it wasn’t for that type of help, my farm may not have been able to survive,” he said, acknowledging that maneuvering through the government bureaucracy still was a challenge.

“Hopefully, we have learned something now and we can recognize any kind of a change in the health of our birds in a much earlier stage and try and eradicate (the problem) because that is the only way to get rid of the virus,” Schneider said.

As temperatures drop heading into the fall, he said, he is getting nervous as he continues to repopulate his farm.

“The migratory birds have gone up to their northern habitat and will be flying south through the flyways again,” Schneider said, adding that a U.S. Department of Agriculture representative informed him that the virus can even attach itself to dust particles or even a snowflake.

“To protect yourself from something like that seems almost impossible, but you’ve got to do whatever you can to try to prevent that from getting to your birds,” he said.

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