FACT SHEET:

Avian Influenza

BACKGROUND

WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA?

- Avian Influenza (AI) is a serious viral disease that has been found around the world, including in Canada. AI can affect many species of food-producing birds, as well as pet and wild birds (Government of Canada, 2024).
- AI can cause a drop in production of eggs, extreme depression, swelling, hemorrhages, and high death rates in birds. Symptoms, severity, and death rates depend on the strain of virus (Ontario, n.d.).
- AI viruses do not typically cause disease in humans, though transmission has occurred when people have had close contact with infected birds or heavily contaminated environments. The virus is destroyed by cooking and humans cannot get AI through eating properly cooked poultry, eggs, or wild game bird products (Alberta, 2023; Government of Canada, 2023).
- It is contagious and can spread to birds through contact with infected poultry and poultry products. It can also spread through contaminated waste, clothing, feed, and equipment (Government of Canada, 2024).

This fact sheet has been designed to complement the Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing's (CCAW) Response Toolkit for Agricultural Crises. Find the Toolkit and other crisis-specific fact sheets on the CCAW website.

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR AGRICULTURAL WELLBEING

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AI IMPACTS ON FARMS AND FARMERS

AI outbreaks can have wide-ranging impacts on farms across Canada, including but not limited to the farm where it is discovered.

There is no treatment for birds that have the disease. Vaccinating the birds may play a role in reducing the spread of disease but does not eliminate the virus (Government of Canada, 2024).

Canada's emergency response strategy to an outbreak of AI is to eradicate the disease and re-establish Canada's disease-free status as quickly as possible (Government of Canada, 2024).

Specific impacts of AI as they relate to farmer wellbeing and livelihoods are described below.

Euthanasia and Loss of Animals

In the case of an outbreak, both healthy and infected birds are culled and infected premises are cleaned and disinfected to contain AI (WOAH, n.d.; Government of Canada, 2023).

If the strain of AI causes high mortality, a quarantine area is imposed, and nearby flocks are also humanely destroyed and disposed of regardless of disease status as a pre-emptive measure (Government of Canada, 2023).

Euthanizing animals will very likely take a heavy toll on the mental health of farmers and their staff. Farmers aim to raise healthy animals and will go to great lengths to protect them; euthanasia is typically a last resort.

Financial Impacts

The necessary culling of all poultry due to an AI outbreak represents heavy economic losses for farmers and may have a long-lasting impact on their livelihoods (WOAH, n.d.)

In 2004, an outbreak of AI in British Columbia resulted in the destruction of millions of domestic poultry, at an estimated cost of $300 million (Alberta, n.d.)

Financial resources for farmers experiencing an AI outbreak are limited. They may be compensated for animals destroyed during disease response situations by the government and/or may hold business interruption insurance, but an AI outbreak is likely to have noticeable financial consequences (Government of Canada, 2022).

Concerns Around Disease Spread

Although it is unlikely that AI would be spread through producers having contact with one another or visiting the same public places due to basic biosecurity measures, some farmers may still have concerns around spreading AI.

In the interviews conducted by CCAW with farmers and individuals working in various aspects of the agricultural industry, interviewees described fears about having brought AI to their own farms and/or having spread the disease to other locations. They also described instances where they were ostracised by community members as a result of having an active AI outbreak.

Uncertainty and Unpredictability

Wild birds always pose a disease risk to domestic poultry; AI is most common in younger migratory birds as they mix with mature birds and gather together, shedding the virus in their feces (Manitoba, n.d.)

In the interviews conducted by CCAW, interviewees described how challenging it can be to fully understand how AI originated on their farms. They also expressed frustration with experiencing AI outbreaks despite following strict biosecurity measures to limit direct and indirect contact between wild birds and domestic poultry.

AI IMPACTS ON INDUSTRY

Spread of AI could have severe impacts on the poultry industry. Each outbreak situation and subsequent response is unique. However, if a quarantine area is imposed, all poultry farms within the area will likely experience impacts regardless of whether they have an active AI outbreak. This could be due to the movement of their poultry being significantly limited and/or as a result of the mandatory culling of all flocks within that area (Government of Canada, 2023).

In 2022, Canada produced poultry and egg products worth $6.3 billion; there were 2,826 regulated chicken producers, 513 registered turkey producers, 235 broiler hatching egg producers, and 1218 egg producers in Canada (Government of Canada, 2023b).

AI can lead to job significant job losses due to the labour intensive nature of the poultry industry (WOAH, n.d.).

AI IMPACTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

With severe mortality rates, avian influenza can heavily impact the health of both poultry and wild birds, which could potentially lead to a devastating effect on the biodiversity of our ecosystems. (WOAH, n.d.)

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