

Lancaster County House Republican Delegation and Sen. Ryan Aument: Lancaster County Republican Delegation stresses preparation for avian influenza outbreak

Text of June 24 press release.

HARRISBURG – The Lancaster County Republican Delegation yesterday met with Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding and other legislators to plan for an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI). The group discussed the most effective way to protect the more than 1,000 Lancaster County flocks that contribute to Pennsylvania’s \$13 billion poultry industry.

The Lancaster County Republican Delegation – State Reps. Bryan Cutler (R-Peach Bottom), Mindy Fee (R-Manheim), Keith J. Greiner (R-Upper Leacock), Dave Hickernell (R-West Donegal) and Steve Mentzer (R-Lititz), Brett Miller (R-East Hempfield) and Dave Zimmerman (R-East Earl) as well as Sen. Ryan P. Aument (R-Lancaster) – encourage producers to implement strict biosecurity measures despite there being no cases of HPAI found in the Commonwealth at this time. Twenty-one states have been affected, and Pennsylvania has almost daily contact with states that have been affected via eggs or poultry. The virus can also be spread via migratory birds, insects and rodents.

“If infected, Lancaster has a lot to lose. With more egg-laying hens than any other county in the United States, we’re a poultry epicenter,” Cutler said. “However, we do have experience responding to HPAI. In 1983-84, the industry—which was not as developed as it is now—lost \$65 million. We can use both the experience we gained and the lessons we can learn from what other states are struggling with now to lessen the impact HPAI may have.”

Representatives from the offices of U.S. Sens. Pat Toomey (R-Pa) and Robert Casey Jr. (D-Pa), as well as Congressman Joe Pitts attended the briefing as well.

“Pennsylvania farmers work hard to feed their families—and to feed ours. The avian flu epidemic affects all Pennsylvanians, both egg and poultry producers and consumers alike, as egg prices have risen more than 50 percent,” Pitts said. Leaders in Washington and Harrisburg need to determine and enact policies that will protect both farmers and their customers from this epidemic before it can threaten Pennsylvania directly.”

Redding stressed the importance of planning on the local level. Farmers must know what they will do if their flock becomes affected beforehand: where will they get the carbon needed to compost the chickens? Where will the hole be dug to bury the chickens? These are just a few of the questions that must have answers to minimize the spread of HPAI.

“The costs associated with this disease would adversely affect our local and state economy, as contamination would result in loss of birds, production and even jobs,” Greiner said. “It is therefore extremely important for those in the poultry industry to begin taking steps to protect their flocks and their businesses.”

In addition to the resounding impact the poultry impact could see, other vital Lancaster County industries could be stunted.

Hickernell, the chairman of the House Tourism and Recreational Development Committee, said proactively getting the word out through traditional and social media that avian flu poses no health threat to humans is critical.

“The last time this happened, it had a devastating impact on tourism in Lancaster County,” Hickernell said. “People misunderstood that this could affect their health and the fact is it can’t be spread to humans.”

Zimmerman said the patterns of North America’s flyaways of migratory birds pose the greatest threat to Lancaster County’s flocks and provide insight regarding when an outbreak could occur. The Mississippi Flyway in the Midwest, where avian flu has become a problem, can be spread by migrating geese. Once up in Canada, the Mississippi and Eastern flyways overlap.

“The next move these geese make will be to fly south in late August and September,” Zimmerman said. “The potential of infected geese flying south, landing in Lancaster County ponds and fields is very great. Lancaster County has 30 percent of all of Pennsylvania’s chicken flocks, and northern Lancaster County has most of those chickens. The risk is very great. We could literally be ground zero for avian flu.” The Commonwealth’s poultry industry generates more than 53,000 jobs that pay more than \$3.2 billion in wages. An outbreak would be financially crippling to many hard-working Pennsylvania families.

“The economic impacts that other states are seeing from the current avian flu outbreak are staggering,” noted Fee. “Losses in Iowa and Minnesota now total in the billions of dollars. A blow of that magnitude to Lancaster County and Pennsylvania poultry producers is something that we simply must take every step to avoid. Loss of birds equals loss of jobs.”

The poultry industry is not presently compensated for birds that die prior to an indemnity inventory check, down time of production facilities and losses to associated industries.

“Lancaster County is one of our nation’s largest poultry producers,” Aument said. “The economic consequences associated with an HPAI outbreak necessitate that we be as prepared as possible to address this terrible virus to protect the people, businesses and industry that would be directly impacted.”

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in partnership with PennAg Industries, academia and other industry leaders has convened an HPAI Task Force, which holds weekly conference calls to discuss preparedness plans. Part of the planning includes steps for depopulation and biosecurity measures.

Briefings are also being provided to other state agency partners as well as the executive branch to discuss their roles in the event of an outbreak.

“I’m encouraged to see the very proactive steps being taken to protect Pennsylvania’s poultry industry,” Miller said. “We definitely need to do all that is necessary to prepare. There’s simply too much at stake to take a passive approach.”

For more information about avian influenza, visit www.agriculture.state.pa.us and click on the “avian influenza” banner.

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