Bird Flu Is Back

www.nytimes.com/2025/10/22/health/h5n1-bird-flu.html

October 22, 2025

Bird flu is back. After a quiet summer, the virus has hit dozens of poultry flocks, resulting in the deaths of nearly seven million farmed birds in the United States since the beginning of September. Among them: about 1.3 million turkeys, putting pressure on the nation's turkey supply in the run-up to Thanksgiving.

Reports of infected wild birds have also surged this fall, and three states — Idaho, Nebraska and Texas — have identified outbreaks in dairy cows.

The virus often flares up in the fall as wild birds begin migrating south; this year, the uptick is occurring during a government shutdown, as federal agencies that are typically involved in the response are working with skeletal staff.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which tracks human cases, and the Department of Agriculture, which monitors animal outbreaks, have both suspended routine communication with states, leaving many officials without up-to-date guidance on how to detect and contain the disease, or a clear national picture of the surge.

"Because of the government shutdown, I know less than I would normally know," said Dr. Amy Swinford, director of the Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory, which is part of a national network of labs that conducts bird flu surveillance.

The agriculture department did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Emily Hilliard, a spokeswoman for the health department, said the C.D.C. was maintaining its emergency operations center and its ability to detect and respond to urgent public health threats.

But immigration raids are scaring away workers at dairy and poultry farms who might otherwise seek help for their symptoms. And the nation is on the cusp of the fall flu season, which may further complicate efforts to distinguish cases of bird flu, some experts said.

The new wave of detections makes clear that the past several months, during which the virus all but vanished from the nation's poultry farms and egg prices fell from record highs, were a temporary respite. This fall's surge began earlier than usual, and experts are bracing themselves for an acceleration in the months ahead.

The virus has "settled into this seasonal pattern," said Richard Webby, an influenza expert at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. "This is going to continue to be the new norm."
The resurgence of the virus also means that as the holidays approach, Americans could see higher prices for both eggs and turkeys.

"Our turkey guys are getting hit pretty hard this fall," said Bernt Nelson, an economist at the American Farm Bureau Federation. Wholesale turkey prices are already 40 percent higher than last year, Mr. Nelson said.

Since early 2022, the virus has affected more than 180 million farmed birds and killed countless wild ones. But it has also infected dozens of new species, suggesting that it has changed significantly over time.

In early 2024, it spilled over into dairy cows, eventually spreading to more than 1,000 herds in 18 states. And it has infected at least 70 people, mostly farmworkers, resulting in several hospitalizations and one death.

The U.S.D.A. has said that it would use emergency funds to support its bird flu program during the shutdown, and the C.D.C. has maintained some "essential" staff members who could help in case of an emergency.

Layoffs at the C.D.C. earlier this month initially affected infectious disease experts, including the acting director of the National Center for Infectious and Respiratory Diseases as well as her entire office. The Trump administration also initially laid off dozens of the agency's "disease detectives," fellows of the Epidemic Intelligence Service who are deployed to help extinguish outbreaks.

But less than 24 hours later, their firings were rescinded. Still, many scientists with expertise in bird flu have been furloughed, and the C.D.C. has suspended multiple regular calls that it hosted to keep state public health and veterinary officials apprised of outbreaks.

Agency officials would normally be updating state officials on the scale of the outbreaks, any changes in the virus and the recommended containment measures.

The National Animal Laboratory Health Network, which is coordinated by the U.S.D.A., has also suspended its weekly calls, which allowed labs to share information. The labs play a critical role in bird flu surveillance, receiving federal funding to test birds, cows and other animals for the virus.

The suspension of the calls means that “none of the labs are talking on a national basis,” said Dr. Keith Poulsen, director of the Wisconsin Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory. “So if something changes, then we don’t have a good way to disseminate that information.”

The virus also remains a threat to wild birds, including many threatened species. Last month, the International Crane Foundation announced the first confirmed death of an endangered whooping crane from bird flu. The crane, which had been raised in a captive breeding program, had been scheduled for release into the wild, where fewer than 1,000 whooping cranes remain.