

American poultry expert shares gold standard for avian flu control

American poultry expert Dr. Fidelis Hegngi briefed African government delegates from nine countries on avian influenza during a two-day seminar in Pretoria and said that 24 hours from detection to depopulation is the ideal for effective avian influenza control.



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Key challenges in many African countries, he said, were delays in reporting outbreaks and responding, as well as the biosecurity challenges brought about by the widespread practice of live bird trade. By responding rapidly with a gold standard of depopulating infected flocks within 24 hours of detection, outbreaks could be effectively limited and controlled, with fewer birds lost, he said. However, where farmers feared massive financial losses, or where labs were not available for rapid testing, outbreaks spread quickly.

“One of the most important lessons we have learned is that it is crucial to move quickly. The goal to aim for is depopulation of infected birds within 24 hours. The longer we wait, the more the virus replicates and the more extensively the environment is contaminated. However, with inadequate lab capacity, avian influenza will take a lot longer to detect and confirm. It also becomes harder to contain where live bird trade is common, and where farmers are not reimbursed for losses suffered due to an outbreak.”

In the US, the government reimburses farmers for birds lost due to avian influenza, which helps incentivise early reporting. Education on basic biosecurity is also crucial in reducing risk, he said, particularly among small-scale poultry farmers.

A problem all countries face from time to time, knowledge sharing crucial

Hegngi noted: “Avian influenza is a problem all countries face from time to time, and strains such as the highly contagious H5N1 present a serious risk to both animals and humans. The most pressing concern is not to allow it to become endemic, then a pandemic – infecting human beings with potentially deadly new strains they have never been exposed to before. In controlling outbreaks, it is extremely important for countries to share knowledge and learn from one another.

For example, when H5 first moved from birds to humans in Hong Kong, the US sent an expert to Hong Kong to learn how it was being managed, which helped inform our own safety, prevention and control programmes. Sharing our knowledge in sub-Saharan Africa ensures we all learn from each-other, reduce risks in our own countries and protecting industry across the globe.”

It was noted that human infection with avian influenza viruses has not occurred from eating properly cooked poultry or poultry products. Some 12 years ago, the International Poultry Council adopted the slogan: “Poultry’s safe, just cook it!”

Multiple-country effort on avian influenza

The Sub-Saharan Africa Seminar on Avian Influenza, hosted by the US Department of Agriculture and the USA Poultry and Egg Export Council (USAPEEC), was the first such knowledge-sharing platform hosted in Africa by the US Government bodies and is thought to be the first ever multiple-country effort conducted by any government on avian influenza.

Senior government officials from Angola, Benin, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa participated in the seminar, sharing their own experiences with avian influenza outbreaks and control methods.

Poultry improvement plan

Hegngi - Senior Staff Veterinary Medical Officer with the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Veterinary Services (VS), Surveillance, Preparedness, and Response Services (SPRS), Avian, Swine, and Aquatic, Animal Health Center (ASAAHC) - also elaborated on the US National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) – a cooperative industry, state, and federal programme through which new diagnostic technology is effectively applied to the improvement of poultry and poultry products throughout the United States and the world. In the United States, NPIP participation assures that all birds are tested prior to slaughter, thus assuring that no infected birds can enter the food chain.

James Sumner, President of USAPEEC, said the seminar was a first step towards further US-African collaboration in this field: “Our goals are the same: to control avian influenza, ensure animal and human safety, and protect the industry and food security.”

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