Behind the Scenes: Producers Prepared

by T.S. Gatz

While we continue to read and hear in the media about the presence in the United States of H5 highly pathogenic avian influenza, commonly called HPAI, sometimes it’s what we don’t read that is equally as important to livestock and poultry producers and consumers.

As of the end of March, the media has shared information regarding the spread of HPAI from its first case at a commercial poultry farm in California to Missouri, Minnesota, Kansas and Arkansas. The media has also kept its readers and listeners informed about numerous countries—including China, Mexico, the EU and most of Central America—banning U.S. poultry and egg imports from either the entire United States or states where the virus has been found. And, thankfully, the media has included information from the Centers for Disease Control calling the risk to people from the H5 HPAI infections in wild birds, backyard flocks and commercial poultry “low” and that “no human infections with the virus has been detected” at this time.

What hasn’t been in the media eye, however, are the preparedness activities that are minimizing the risk of exposure of poultry flocks to HPAI, thereby limiting its spread and saving numerous poultry producers from having to depopulate their flocks. The same activity also deserves significant credit for maintaining business continuity—a big deal when you consider the United States produces nearly 80 billion eggs annually and the average U.S. family of four consumes 1,000 eggs per year.

This behind-the-scene effort is the Secure Egg Supply Plan, a robust collaborative partnership that USDA APHIS Veterinary Services and the egg industry have supported since its introduction in 2008.

Funded by USDA APHIS National Preparedness and Incident Coordination Center, the Secure Egg Supply Plan is a collaboration between the federal government, state governments, industry and academia. The Secure Egg Supply Plan involves specific science-based and risk-based recommendations that emergency decision-makers—such as federal and state officials —can use to rapidly decide whether to issue or deny permits for the movements of egg industry products during an HPAI outbreak.

“Eggs are a just-in-time commodity—it’s only a few days from the farm to the grocery store shelf,” explains Jim Roth, DVM, PhD, Director of the Center for Food Security and Public Health, Iowa State University. “If a large outbreak of H5 HPAI occurs and a large part of Iowa is quarantined, a lot of fresh eggs—and other eggs such as liquid eggs and other egg products—could be affected. The Secure Egg Supply Plan has measures in place that ensure that eggs are available and that they are safe to consume.

“On the egg supplier side, producers won’t have to destroy uninfected eggs. With the Secure Egg Supply Plan in place, non-infected commercial egg businesses can move eggs without unnecessary disruption, cold storage is not plagued with a back-up of eggs and millions of eggs need not spoil.”
Roth points out that egg producers in Iowa, the No. 1 producer of eggs in the nation, have hopped on the Secure Egg Supply Plan bandwagon and nearly all are taking part in the Voluntary Preparedness Components of the Secure Egg Supply Plan.

“The Secure Egg Supply Plan is one of those things you wish never has to put into action, but it’s critical to have it when a disease outbreak occurs,” stated one egg producer. “It helped us significantly to increase biosecurity and be prepared to prove that our eggs are free of HPAI.”

Roth commends egg producers participating in the plan’s Voluntary Preparedness Components.

“They have done their steps ahead of time,” Dr. Roth elaborates. “They are in compliance with a 45-item biosecurity checklist for egg production premises, have their location verified using GPS coordinates and are trained regarding epidemiology questionnaires and how to properly collect and submit samples for an active surveillance program. They are proactive and ready.”

“Each of those involved with the Voluntary Preparedness Components also have entered data into an SES online data portal and are ready to input additional information when an outbreak occurs,” he said.

In the case of a disease outbreak, Incident Commanders—the officials in charge of an outbreak response—can access each producer’s information via the data portal to help determine if movement permits can be issued.

Dr. Roth explains that, in addition to having data already in the portal, egg producers within a designated control area, usually a 6.2 mile radius—about 120 square-mile area—of where the virus has been found, follow specific procedures and input additional disease incident-related data into the portal. Data include health and production data on their flocks. The egg producers are also required to submit daily swabs from their birds to a veterinary diagnostic laboratory for testing.

“Two days of negative swabs indicates the flock is not infected, and, thanks to the Secure Egg Supply Plan, we only have a two-day lag of movement of eggs,” Dr. Roth states. “When the chickens are healthy and test negative, there is a very high degree of confidence that the eggs produced two days earlier are free of HPAI virus.

“Producers being proactive and participating in the Secure Egg Supply Plan’s Voluntary Preparedness Components can make a big difference to their business bottom line—and help consumers continue to have access to eggs and egg products.”

To date, five State Animal Health Officials have requested to have their states enrolled in the SES voluntary preparedness component of the SES plan with approximately 100 egg premises participating.

Dr. Roth is quick to point out that the Secure Egg Supply Plan’s current portal was built as an example for Iowa and is not as versatile as it needs to be on a national level. What is needed, he says, is a national portal that “has a lot more versatility and capability.”
“With the latest outbreak of HPAI, more states are interested in the Voluntary Preparedness Components’ portal,” he states. “Fortunately, a national portal is being developed right now.”

Using a grant from the Iowa Regents Innovation Fund—which specifies the work must be undertaken by a small business in Iowa that wants to work with the university, the Center for Food Security and Public Health has partnered with Iowa-based GlobalVetLINK to develop a vigorous and versatile national portal.

“GlobalVetLINK has the capability to build it,” Dr. Roth interjects. “The company has an outstanding reputation and a proven record for developing innovative digital solutions for animal health. It’s exciting to see this new portal develop.”

In the big scheme of things, today’s novel technology combined with the collaborative efforts between industry, academia and state and Federal governments make it possible for the United States to have a number of Secure Food Supply Plans in preparation for foreign animal disease outbreaks. In addition to a Secure Egg Supply Plan, Secure Food Supply plans are in various stages of development for pork, milk, turkeys, broilers and beef.

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