

Ohio poultry owners are being advised to take extra precautions to guard and monitor their birds against a strain of avian flu that has been detected in the Mississippi Migratory Bird Flyway, although there has been no detection of the illness in Ohio, according to the Ohio Department of Agriculture.



This comes as three worrisome strains of avian flu were also detected in birds out West. These viruses can cause serious disease in birds, and their appearance prompted poultry veterinarians at The Ohio State University a few weeks ago to recommend that Ohio's commercial producers and backyard chicken enthusiasts alike take precautions to protect their flocks.

Migratory birds appear to be playing a role in spreading the virus, said Mohamed El-Gazzar, poultry veterinarian for Ohio State University Extension. OSU Extension is the outreach arm of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences.

The H5N2 strain was detected in the Mississippi flyway, according to Tony Forshey, state veterinarian for the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Minnesota, Missouri and Arkansas all reported positive cases, authorities said.

While there aren't any suspected cases in Ohio, the agency put out the warning "Because we are also located within the Mississippi flyway, we want poultry owners to be aware and to take proper precautions," Forshey said in a statement.

The three strains that were detected in December 2014 in the Pacific Migratory Bird Flyway, in Washington, Oregon, California, Utah, Idaho and Nevada, are related to a virus that circulated in Asia and Europe in 2014, said El-Gazzar, who is also an assistant professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine.

These viruses are classified as highly pathogenic, meaning they are extremely infectious and fatal for birds, he said.

"It's already here in the Mississippi flyway and this requires increased biosecurity for Ohio poultry flocks, whether commercial or non-commercial," said El-Gazzar. "If you see increased mortality in your birds, call the ODA animal disease hotline."

The animal disease hotline at ODA is 800-300-9755 or 614-728-6220.

It's important to note that these strains are not reported to be a human health concern, El-Gazzar said. This has been strictly an avian disease outbreak - human illness has never been reported in relation to this outbreak in North America, Europe or Asia, and poultry products such as chicken and turkey are safe to eat.

Still, producers and poultry owners should take all necessary measures to protect their birds, El-Gazzar said.

According to the Ohio Poultry Association, the state's poultry industry, including egg, turkey and chicken production, is

valued at \$786 million. Ohio ranks second in the nation in egg production and ninth nationally in turkey production.

Earlier last month, El-Gazzar and colleague Richard Slemons, professor emeritus in the College of Veterinary Medicine, sent a notice to producers through Ohio State's Ohio Veterinary Newsletter.

Backyard poultry owners should consider keeping their birds in enclosed covered runs for the next several months or until the threat from the viruses passes, he said.

Other precautions El-Gazzar recommends include:

- In addition to avoiding direct contact between migratory and domestic birds, it's important to prevent indirect contact, as well. "For example, if there's an open body of water nearby that attracts wild birds, don't go out, potentially step in fecal material, and then come back to your birds and transmit an infection," he said.
- Protect birds from other poultry populations. "We don't encourage mixing flocks, mixing ages or mixing species," El-Gazzar said. "Visitors to your bird flock, whether they're from the neighborhood or from other farms, are highly discouraged."
- Commercial producers or backyard poultry owners should boost insect and rodent control efforts. "Make sure your houses are animal-proof, so that raccoons, opossums or any varmints can't get in, and bird-proof so that wild birds can get in." Such biosecurity measures also include keeping feed and water clean.

Updates on the Pacific flyway avian influenza outbreak are online at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service website, www.aphis.usda.gov. For additional information on poultry biosecurity measures, see the service's poultry biosecurity website at www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/birdbiosecurity/biosecurity/basicspoultry.htm.

OSU Extension also has a fact sheet, Biosecurity for Poultry, online at ohioline.osu.edu/vme-fact/0009.html.

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