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CONTACT:

Dr. Marty Zaluski, MT Dept. of Livestock, (406) 444-2043, mzaluski@mt.gov

Dr. Tahnee Szymanski, MT Dept. of Livestock, (406) 444-5214, tszymanski@mt.gov

Avian Influenza Reported in Poultry in Judith Basin and Cascade Counties

Helena, Mont. – On Friday, April 8th, The Montana Department of Livestock (MDOL) announced the confirmation of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in two Montana flocks. These are the first cases of HPAI reported in domestic poultry in Montana since 2015. Montana is the 25th state to report cases of HPAI in domestic poultry in 2022.

Avian influenza is an infectious viral disease of birds that can cause high mortality rates in domestic flocks. Migratory waterfowl are the primary source for avian influenza (AI). Wild birds can be infected and appear healthy but shed virus in the feces, saliva, and respiratory secretions. Domestic poultry become infected through direct contact with infected wild birds, or through contact with contaminated objects, equipment, or the environment.

One of the flocks is a backyard flock in Judith Basin County and the other is a small layer and meat-bird operation in Cascade County. The flocks were reported to MDOL following increased rates of mortality and were confirmed to have the HPAI H5 strain associated with the outbreak occurring in other parts of the country. Samples from both flocks were tested at the Montana Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (MVDL) which is part of the National Animal Health Laboratory Network, and confirmed at the National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, IA. The capability of the MVDL allows state animal health officials to get a jump start on response while awaiting confirmatory results. Avian influenza is a reportable disease in Montana and the presence of avian influenza in a country or region can have significant impacts on the trade of poultry products.

The affected flocks have been placed under quarantine and are required to be depopulated to prevent further spread of the disease. Flock owners are eligible to receive indemnity on their birds from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The Montana Department of Livestock is conducting an epidemiological investigation and will be identifying other poultry producers in the area to conduct disease surveillance and to provide educational resources.

As a result of this detection and the scope of the national outbreak, the Department is issuing an Official Order that prohibits all poultry shows, exhibitions, swaps, and public sales for the next 60 days to reduce the risk of exposure to HPAI. Exhibitions are an increased risk of HPAI because animals from multiple sources are concentrated in one area during the event. Cancellation of shows and exhibitions is a proactive step to prevent disease in our domestic poultry population. Depending on disease status in 60 days, this order may be modified or extended. The order does not apply to private, catalog, or retail sale of poultry.

In addition to cancelling shows and exhibitions, poultry producers should implement biosecurity measures including:

- Prevent contact between wild or migratory birds and domestic poultry, including access by wild birds to feed and water sources.
- House birds indoors to the extent possible to limit exposure to wild or migratory birds.
- Limit visitor access to areas where birds are housed.
- Use dedicated clothing and protective footwear when caring for domestic poultry.
- Immediately isolate sick animals and contact your veterinarian or MDOL.

“Exposure to wild birds presents the greatest risk to domestic poultry,” says Dr. Marty Zaluski, State Veterinarian. “Fortunately, reducing this risk can be accomplished with simple changes to biosecurity with minimal financial investment.”

Sick birds can exhibit numerous signs such as swollen eyes, discolored comb and legs, significant drop in egg production or water and feed consumption, or sudden death. MDOL encourages all poultry producers to immediately report sudden onset of illness or high death loss in domestic poultry to their veterinarian or the department at (444-2976). If you find sick or dead wild birds that have died from unknown causes, please contact your local FWP Warden, Biologist or Regional office, or call the FWP wildlife veterinarian (577-7880).

MDOL emphasizes that existing safeguards to keep food safe and wholesome are sufficient to protect people, and the food supply in the United States is one of the safest in the world. Virus is rarely found in food and is readily destroyed by cooking.

“There is no increased risk to consumption of poultry or poultry products,” Zaluski continued. “Normal food handling and preparation practices that keep food safe are important every day.”

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) considers the risk to people from these HPAI infections in wild birds, backyard flocks and commercial poultry, to be low. No human infections with the virus have been detected at this time. However, it is recommended that people follow proper sanitary precautions when handling birds. Wear latex or rubber gloves when cleaning birds, washing hands with soapy water after cleaning, clean and disinfect equipment and surfaces that came in contact with the bird, and cook thoroughly before eating the meat. As a reminder, the US Department of Agriculture recommends cooking poultry to 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

The mission of the Montana Department of Livestock is to control and eradicate animal diseases, prevent the transmission of animal diseases to humans, and to protect the livestock industry from theft and predatory animals. For more information on the Montana Department of Livestock, visit www.liv.mt.gov.

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For more information on biosecurity, please visit the USDA website at <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/animal-disease-information/avian/defend-the-flock-program/df-resources/df-resources>.

For more information on national cases of HPAI, please visit the USDA website at <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/animal-disease-information/avian/avian-influenza/2022-hpai>.

For information on human health concerns and HPAI, please visit the CDC website at <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/avian-flu-summary.htm>.