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“BIRD FLU” NOT AN IMMINENT THREAT IN U.S., TOP FEDERAL SCIENTIST SAYS

Asian bird flu--H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza--is not an imminent threat to public health in the United States because animals are much better protected than in Third World countries and the virus itself might never become a type easily transmitted to humans, according to the U.S. government's leading expert on infectious diseases.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Disease, said in an interview with the Associated Press that a finding of H5N1 HPAI in wild birds will not mean that the virus will spread to domesticated birds, in contrast to the experience in less developed countries.

“The surveillance is going to be so intense that it is very unlikely that there is going to be the type of situation we see everywhere from Nigeria to Indonesia,” Fauci said. “It won't be what you see in countries in which there is no regulation, in which there is no incentive to compensate farmers, in which the people, who are so poor, when they see their chickens are getting infected they immediately sell them or they don't tell anybody because they don't want them culled. That is a critical issue that is fundamentally different than what we see in Western Europe and that we will see in the United States. One migratory bird does not a pandemic make.”

He noted that most poultry producers in the United States keep their birds isolated from contact with wild birds, and that most people in the United States have little contact with poultry or their droppings which contain high level of virus if the birds are infected.

Fauci also cast doubt on the assumption that a human pandemic is likely to emerge from the bird disease.

“It is entirely conceivable that this virus is inherently programmed that it will never be able to go efficiently from human to human,” Fauci said. “Hopefully the epidemic (in birds) will burn itself out, which epidemics do, before the virus evolves the capability of being more efficient in going from human to human.”

The public should worry only if bird flu avian influenza begins to show signs of evolving into more of a human threat. In that case, airline passengers arriving from an afflicted area would pose a greater threat than any chicken, Fauci said.