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The Poultry Industry Association of New Zealand (PIANZ) and the Egg Producers Federation (EPF) have joined with the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) to provide farmers with regular updates about our preparations for high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI).

Readiness planning continues, informed by H7N6 response

The detection of the H7N6 strain of HPAI at Hillgrove Farm in early December last year prompted a rapid response from MPI, Mainland Poultry and industry. For MPI, many of the staff who are involved in readiness planning moved over into the response team to support activities at or around Hillgrove. With confirmation that the outbreak has been successfully contained to one site in Otago, there is now a much smaller team involved with the H7N6 response (compared to 200 at the peak in December), and the focus is turning back to planning for a possible H5N1 incursion.

In the same way that our collective H5N1 readiness planning helped to inform the response to H7N6, lessons from the H7N6 response are informing industry and MPI's H5N1 ongoing readiness work.

A key take out from the H7N6 response is the need for industry and MPI to prioritise work on advancing our understanding of industry capacity and capability to manage an outbreak of H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b. This would include how operational services will be delivered for humane destruction, disposal, cleaning and disinfection and long-term disease risk management if H5N1 becomes established in wild bird populations in New Zealand.

The H7N6 response highlighted the importance of strong biosecurity. Mainland Poultry owner and EPF Chair John McKay said:

"It is not great we were the first to get HPAI, but we were prepared and had the resources and expertise to deal with it. I hope that our experience will assist other farmers in the future should there be other outbreaks. It is a timely reminder to everyone that biosecurity is not something you can take lightly, and it is vital as an industry to have robust plans in place."

Reflecting on the outbreak, he said the key thing for him was the importance of rigorous on-farm biosecurity.

"All farmers can be prepared with adoption of good biosecurity practices, monitoring the health of their flocks or herds and seeking vet advice quickly if their animals are unwell."

A more detailed update on the H7N6 response follows.

Biosecurity plans are vital

We know from our trips to the UK and Australia last year, and from the H7N6 outbreak in Otago, that strong biosecurity is the best form of defence against HPAI viruses. It is essential for every farmer to have a robust biosecurity plan that is tailored to their farm's needs. As egg producers are not audited for biosecurity as part of their RMP, an external biosecurity audit provides additional confidence that your plan addresses your farm's specific needs, and that it meets and maintains optimal industry standards.

EPF has been working with MPI to enhance biosecurity resources for its farmers, building on the existing guidance available on the members' website.

For the EPF members, a Biosecurity Booklet and Farm Biosecurity Template have been trialled with farmers to make sure they meet your needs. The Template can be tailored to farms of assorted sizes and biosecurity needs. To assist layer farmers to adapt the template to their own requirements, MPI's On Farm Support team will be available to work with individual farmers.

The resources, and information on how to access the assistance of the On Farm Support team, will be shared with members in the next few weeks.

Operational planning workshops

While continuing the focus on the '3 Ds', operational readiness work over the next month or so will include workshops for interested industry members to discuss compensation, the use of movement controls and surveillance. These workshops were originally planned for December and were put on hold due to the focus required on the H7N6 response.

H7N6 Otago response update

Cleaning and disinfection (C&D) operations at Hillgrove Farm began on 6 January 2025 and are progressing well. Due to the size of the site and the complexities of cleaning complex free-range sheds, this has been a huge undertaking for Mainland Poultry, MPI and the lead contractor NZ Biosecurity Services Ltd.

Each shed must be cleaned of all waste, with a mixture of fumigation, jet washing, and hot washing, along with drying periods and then inspections – meaning the process will take time. Work is on track to complete cleaning the sheds by the end of March.

Grass in the free-range areas of the property also needs to be managed. This requires cutting and baling the grass, then treating the underlying soil with lime to reduce the risk of live virus persisting in the soil. There are several rock garden areas on the site that also require treatment, and which are presenting quite an operational and technical challenge.

Following the successful completion and audit of treatment, a stand-down period of 28 days will apply before poultry can be re-introduced to the property. Mainland Poultry is finalising its plan for repopulation and return to normal operations at Hillgrove Farm. This will be reviewed by MPI and industry representatives to ensure it meets the expectations of industry, ensures an efficient return to operations, and is in line with requirements under the Biosecurity Act.

Webinar details for both poultry and egg producers are being worked through, so that the experiences and learnings from the Hillgrove response can be relayed to all members. Speaker commitments are being finalised and the date for the webinar will be circulated soon.

Trade update

MPI has been working with trading partners since the outbreak to reinstate exports of risk poultry products (such as table eggs, poultry meat and day-old-chicks) and continues to make positive progress in resuming safe trade.

Heat treated product, including rendered products and pasteurised eggs, can continue to be safely traded, as well as poultry and petfood that has undergone specific heat treatments.

There continues to be ongoing work between Industry and MPI to work through how exports are reinstated as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Containerised Gas Units (CGUs)

In January, a United Kingdom-based company, Livetec, which specialises in the response work required for the HPAI outbreaks in the UK, visited New Zealand at the invitation of the industry.

Livetec was established as HPAI H5N1 began to rapidly spread across the United Kingdom, requiring the development of specialised disposal equipment – containerised gas units - (CGUs), that could be easily moved from region to region, as required.

Containerised gassing was used as an efficient means to help quickly depopulate the birds in the Central Otago farm affected by the HPAI H7N6 outbreak in December last year.

The purpose of Livetec's New Zealand visit was so members of the poultry and egg industries could understand the factors required in operating, storing, and moving the CGUs around the country, in the event of an HPAI outbreak.

Industry representatives attended Livetec presentations and met on-site at Tegel Henderson to see the CGU in operation.

"Having experts from a country that is geographically similar in size to New Zealand, gave useful insight into how CGUs can best be used here," said Michael Brooks.

Livetec explained that CGUs depopulated the birds with minimum stress and adhered to the United Kingdom's animal welfare code for depopulation, which is like New Zealand animal welfare codes.

The United Kingdom is entering its fourth year dealing with the seasonal spread of HPAI H5N1. The CGUs have proved to work quickly to help in undertaking depopulation.

As a result, a number of CGUs have been purchased by the industry, adding to several that are already in New Zealand. Both the poultry and egg industries are now well resourced with CGUs to manage a wider HPAI outbreak, should it occur. Discussions are underway on siting of the units, transport to move them, and training of people to operate them, to best serve both industries.

Member survey

As 2025 gets underway, MPI, PIANZ and EPF are reflecting on the first experience with HPAI we all had in December 2024.

The first New Zealand HPAI outbreak was on a farm with strong biosecurity practices already in place. It served as a stark warning of how quickly HPAI can temporarily devastate a poultry operation, despite precautions taken by the farmer to prevent it.

These joint newsletters from MPI, PIANZ and EPF are an important vehicle to deliver the latest updates about HPAI, and to help you find the best resources and information to bolster your own biosecurity practices. It is important to both MPI and Industry that we are all best prepared, and that the information this newsletter delivers is hitting the mark with what you need to know. So that we can do that, we ask that you answer this brief survey so we can make sure you are getting the right information on a regular basis. If you are able to complete this as soon as is convenient, we can tailor the next HPAI H5N1 Update accordingly.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2MT98WF

LPAI and wild birds

MPI has been monitoring low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) in wild bird populations here for over 20 years and many species of wild birds may have strains of the virus. Internationally, over 5,000 species of wild birds have LPAI.

LPAI causes few or no signs of illness in wild birds but when it infects chickens, it can mutate into HPAI. The mutation to HPAI happens by chance after the chicken is exposed to the low pathogenicity form of the virus. It does not happen with every exposure to the virus. This is what caused outbreak of H7N6 at Hillgrove Farm. Despite this event, there is no evidence to suggest that the risk of spread of LPAI from wild birds to poultry has changed.

There is no evidence to suggest there has been any recent change in the circulating LPAI viruses in wild birds in New Zealand or that the risk of spread of LPAI from wild birds to poultry has changed. However, changes in animal husbandry with more free-range birds does create the potential for increasing exposure of poultry to LPAI viruses carried by wild birds. Good on-farm biosecurity and minimising the contact between wild birds and poultry is the recommended approach to protecting poultry from bird flu.

Culling wild birds to prevent the spread of avian influenza will not prevent transmission and may worsen outbreaks. Culling would potentially increase bird movements and cause stress to any native or threatened birds in the habitat. Increased stress will cause increased viral shedding, additional moving and mixing of birds.

Food safety during a bird flu outbreak

As part of the response to the H7N6 detection in Otago, New Zealand Food Safety published advice on food safety during a bird flu outbreak.

The key message was that eating eggs and poultry products is safe and there are no food safety concerns with bird flu because avian influenza viruses are sensitive to heat treatment.

“There is no evidence that people can be infected with avian influenza by eating thoroughly cooked eggs or poultry (like chicken, turkey, or duck), or foods that contain them.

“Eggs should be cooked until the white is completely firm, and the yolk begins to thicken.

“Chicken needs to be cooked to an internal temperature of:

- 75°C for at least 30 seconds, or
- 70°C for 3 minutes, or
- 65°C for 15 minutes.”

Read more on the MPI website: www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/66309-Food-safety-advice-during-bird-flu-outbreaks-Fact-sheet

Otago outbreak of avian botulism

An outbreak of avian botulism at the Waikouaiti wastewater treatment plant in January has killed many ducks, but is not connected to the H7N6 outbreak at Hillgrove Farm. Avian botulism is unrelated to avian influenza and is endemic in New Zealand. Outbreaks occur frequently, particularly in the North Island, but there have been recent outbreaks in several South Island regions.

The Dunedin City Council is managing the outbreak at the wastewater treatment plant. You can read more about that here: www.dunedin.govt.nz/news-and-events/news/january-2025/caution-urged-over-bird-deaths-at-waikouaiti-estuary

MPI’s role in an event like this is to determine whether an exotic (introduced) disease was involved in the death of the birds. In this case, testing ruled out any exotic disease, but did confirm avian botulism.

HPAI detections overseas

The US and UK are both experiencing increasing outbreaks of H5N1 in poultry, and there have been reports of human cases of bird flu in people who have worked closely with infected poultry.

MPI remains in close contact with colleagues overseas and is monitoring developments there. However, this increase in outbreaks during the northern hemisphere winter is only to be expected in a seasonal disease that is spread by migrating wildlife. Our geographic isolation has protected us from it in the past, but as we know that may not continue forever.

In Australia, Agriculture Victoria has confirmed the presence of avian influenza at a poultry property in northern Victoria. The Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness confirmed high pathogenicity H7N8, which is different to the strain that impacted Victorian poultry farms during 2024.

These outbreaks are a timely reminder of the importance of taking steps now to make sure you have strong biosecurity practices in place to protect your flocks and limit the impact of H5N1 if it arrives here.

Health agencies and MPI are close to finalising guidelines on health and safety for people working in close contact with poultry and wild birds, including use of personal protective equipment.

Resources

Information and advice on HPAI – MPI

www.mpi.govt.nz/HPAI

'Bird flu, be ready' information for backyard and pet bird owners – MPI

www.mpi.govt.nz/bird-flu

Information on the latest situation in the United Kingdom – UK Govt

Bird flu latest situation

Information on the latest situation in the US – CDC

Bird flu situation summary

Information on the outbreak in Victoria, Australia – Agriculture Victoria

Bird flu

Contact us

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