

Issue 13, 28 November 2025

Championing strengthened avian flu preparedness

A new Executive Director at PIANZ and the EPF brings a fresh focus to the fight against high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI).

With long-serving Executive Director Michael Brooks transitioning to retirement, Fiona MacMillan has arrived to a myriad of HPAI planning and preparedness activities underway across the New Zealand Poultry Industry and the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI).

Fiona has joined the poultry industry from a long career in seafood, which came with its fair share of pest and disease incursions. But Fiona acknowledges the HPAI H5N1 strain will most likely be on a completely different scale.

“It has the potential to be devastating. Not only for our precious native species, but the impact on our commercial flocks.

“Industry members are increasingly engaged with biosecurity preparation, and I am truly impressed with the huge body of work being done between MPI and industry to prepare.

“New Zealand is lucky. Not just because HPAI H5N1 has not yet arrived, but because we have this opportunity to learn from the rest of the world. One month into the role and I can see how these learnings are being adopted nationally. Valuable lessons were also learned from the December 2024 low path AI that mutated, causing the H7N6 outbreak in Otago.”



Fiona MacMillan, Executive Director at PIANZ and EPF.

That outbreak required the culling of nearly 200,000 layer hens, and Fiona worries about the impact on the industry if the more deadly globally circulating H5N1 strain gets here.

“The impact will go beyond the financial toll. What we’re hearing from places like the United Kingdom, is the mental toll on farmers from avian influenza is significant. H5N1 in particular comes in seasonal waves, and so do the impacts from it.

“Industry and MPI are working hard to help our farmers. We offer advice, support, resources and tools to ensure your business is as ready as possible to minimise the impact of H5N1.”

Fiona adds that the upcoming proposed regulatory changes will intensify the biosecurity standards required on farms, to lift the levels of protection against diseases and strengthen expectations for farm level response for disease like HPAI H5N1.

MPI and Industry discuss HPAI roles and responsibilities

Close collaboration between MPI and the poultry industry is a vital part of increasing New Zealand's preparedness for HPAI H5N1.

The newly formed Poultry Council is a significant step in how we work together. The Council oversees a joint Government Industry Agreement (GIA) readiness work programme and provides governance for decisions affecting the wider poultry industry.

"An immediate priority for the Council is assessing what support can be provided to farmers who are at the coalface protecting our industry. They play a critical role in pest and disease management. We are eager to give them maximum support in preparing for H5N1," says Fiona MacMillan.

The Council is also prioritising building clear roles and responsibilities for different parties, should HPAI H5N1 arrive on our shores.

This month, MPI hosted a team from Poultry Industry New Zealand (PIANZ) and the Egg Producers Federations (EPF) to talk about how an incursion of the highly pathogenic H5N1 variety might play out.

"Working through what a bird flu outbreak might look like is invaluable. We can't know we are ready if we haven't worked through some of the likely scenarios that may play out if H5N1 gets to New Zealand," says Fiona MacMillan.

"It is great to work with industry to build a clear picture of the roles that each of us play in disease management. Exploring scenarios and different steps in the process provides greater clarity about what we will be doing and how we will support each other" says MPI Chief Biosecurity Officer Peter Thomson.

"This strengthens our partnership and ensures we can hit the ground running should we need to respond to an HPAI incursion."

Consultation closed on new regulations for H5N1

Consultation is now closed on new regulations proposed to strengthen the long-term management of HPAI H5N1 in poultry.

MPI and industry have been working closely to prepare for H5N1. A key part of this work has been the development of an approach to long-term management of the virus. Getting this right minimises the impact on industry and gives farmers the best possible chance to protect their businesses.

Announcing the consultation on the proposed regulations, Biosecurity Minister Andrew Hoggard said, “If [the virus] arrives here, it will almost certainly establish itself in wild birds and could spread to poultry and other wildlife. That could mean shortages of chicken and eggs for Kiwi families, serious animal welfare issues, and costs for farmers and growers. Our focus is on protecting people’s livelihoods and keeping food on the table.”

The proposed regulations are intended to ensure New Zealand has the necessary practices, reporting, and compliance tools to manage the risk posed by H5N1 to commercial poultry operators. It will also minimise the disease impact on wild and captive birds, other animals, and people.

Submissions on the proposed regulations were accepted from September until 2 November 2025. MPI received 36 submissions, with feedback broadly supportive of the proposals.

During the consultation period, MPI held two webinars, one exclusive to industry members. These webinars drew around 100 attendees and proved a useful way to engage people with the consultation process.

MPI is grateful to everyone who took the time to give their feedback. Input from industry is a valuable contribution to shaping these important regulations.

MPI is now working through the submissions and putting together detailed policy proposals for the Minister and Cabinet. A decision is expected early in 2026.

Depopulation and decontamination trials underway

Two of three critical trials of depopulation and decontamination methods have been successfully completed, with the third scheduled for the first quarter of 2026. These trials are part of the HPAI operational readiness projects planned through the GIA joint work programme between MPI, PIANZ, and EPF.

For depopulation, two methods are being trialled. The first examines the use of nitrogen in Containerised Gassing Units (CGUs) and was successfully completed in October. The second, trialling Whole House Gassing, is scheduled to be completed by Easter 2026.

Trial of nitrogen use in Containerised Gassing Units (CGUs) for poultry depopulation

Current depopulation methods rely on carbon dioxide (CO_2) in CGUs. But CO_2 supply in New Zealand is limited. Nitrogen, by contrast, is widely available and therefore a more practical alternative to CO_2.

A feasibility trial using nitrogen was successfully completed in New Plymouth, with industry representatives and MPI animal welfare staff present. The trial confirmed nitrogen's potential as a scalable, robust option for emergency response and routine depopulation, strengthening national readiness for exotic disease outbreaks like HPAI H5N1.

A detailed report is being developed and will be distributed by the end of the year.

Trial of whole house gassing

This internationally recognised method for shed depopulation is being explored for New Zealand conditions. The trial, planned for completion by Easter 2026, aligns with the commercial depopulation schedule for egg layer sheds.

Its purpose is to assess whole house gassing as an alternative to cervical dislocation or CGUs. Benefits include reduced handling of infected birds, lower health and safety risks, and less disease spread from movement of people and birds. It could also save time and labour during outbreaks.

For decontamination, a heating-based disinfection method has just been successfully trialled.

Trial heating-based disinfection methods

Heating-based disinfection offers a scalable, cost-effective alternative to traditional chemical methods which can be labour-intensive, environmentally risky, and expensive during outbreaks. This approach has potential benefits beyond improving HPAI H5N1 preparedness. It can also help reduce salmonella and campylobacter contamination in sheds.

Joanne Thomas, Industry Lead, HPAI Readiness, who attended the trial with MPI biosecurity staff, said all went according to plan.

"The trial went well and indicates heat-based disinfection is a viable alternative to traditional water and chemical methods for decontamination. The specific benefits of heat-based disinfection include reducing human health and environmental risks

HPAI H5N1 overseas

New Zealand, Australia, and the South Pacific remain free of high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI), but reported detections overseas are on the rise linked to seasonal migration of wild birds.

In North America, Europe, and East Asia, HPAI detections tend to increase early in the year, before plateauing in summer and rising again in autumn. Across all three regions, detections appear to be accumulating faster than in 2024.

Across Europe, there have been 244 detections from 26 countries reported in birds since 1 September (data as of 7 November). The greatest number have been from Germany (96 detections), France (86), the United Kingdom (45), and the Netherlands (38).

In response to rising detections, poultry housing orders have been declared in several European countries. These countries include Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, and the UK.

For North America, there have been 121 detections from 27 provinces/states across Canada and the US reported in birds in the same period (data as of 7 November). The greatest numbers have been from Minnesota (24), Alberta (11), South Dakota (10), and Oregon (9).

Two cases of H5N1 have been detected in Hawai'i, the first for the state since a positive wastewater sample in February 2025. The virus was found in northern pintail ducks, a migratory species that travels regularly to Hawai'i and other islands in the Northern Pacific. These birds rarely cross the equator.

In East Asia, there have been 25 detections altogether, from Japan (19), South Korea (2) and Taiwan (4) (data as of 7 November).

In the Southern Hemisphere, there has been an increase in reported detections in Africa since the beginning of September, almost all of them in South Africa.

H5N1 is confirmed in elephant seals on Heard Island in the subantarctic Indian Ocean, around 4,000km southwest of Perth. H5N1 on Heard Island is not unexpected, given its location 450km from Kerguelen Island where the virus has been found previously. The risk of the virus arriving in Australia or New Zealand is not changed with this detection.

Resources

https://www.woah.org/en/disease/avian-influenza/

https://www.fao.org/animal-health/animal-diseases/highly-pathogenic-avian-influenza/en

https://scar.org/library-data/avian-flu

Contact us

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 this update about our preparations for high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1.

This will be our last newsletter for 2025. Wishing all of you a safe and happy holiday season. We look forward to continuing our updates on HPAI readiness and response in the New Year.

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

Egg Producers Federation of New Zealand (Inc)

PIANZ

Ministry for Primary Industries
Manatū Ahu Matua

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