

Statement of Dr. John Clifford
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Roundtable on High Pathogenic Avian Influenza in China
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Thank you very much for asking me to take part in this roundtable discussion. My name is Dr. John Clifford, and I am the Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services with the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, or APHIS. In this position, I also serve as USDA's Chief Veterinary Officer.

We in the Federal Government take the threat posed by avian influenza very seriously, and we're committed to working to carry out the President's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza.

USDA has many key roles to play as outlined in the National Strategy. In my mind, though, one of the most important is our involvement overseas to help affected countries take steps to combat the Asian H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza virus at its source—in poultry populations.

Representatives attending last month's International Ministerial Pledging Conference on Avian and Human Pandemic Influenza in Beijing, China, also recognize the importance of a coordinated global effort to address this disease. According to the European Commission, cosponsor of the conference along with the World Bank and the Chinese government, a total of \$1.9 billion was pledged by the attending countries. This funding will help affected countries fight outbreaks of the Asian H5N1 avian influenza virus and also assist neighboring countries in efforts to prepare for any related human health issues.

During the conference, President Bush announced that the United States will provide substantial funding—\$334 million—to support the global campaign against avian influenza. This represents the largest single national contribution thus far to these global efforts. Resources will be used, among other things, to assist countries with national preparedness plans, improve surveillance and response systems for domestic poultry, and to provide assistance in establishing wild bird surveillance programs.

As part of this funding I just mentioned, USDA received \$18 million to advance collaboration with international organizations to help countries in southeast Asia take steps to enhance their veterinary infrastructure and adopt other practical, effective programs against Asian H5N1.

My boss, APHIS Administrator Dr. Ron DeHaven, has traveled recently to Southeast Asia to assess the animal disease situation in several countries and the steps being taken in response. The information and observations he collected are helping USDA develop its plan to work with international organizations, primarily the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, to deliver the best possible technical assistance to these countries. By effectively combating this disease in birds, I am confident that we can help lower the virus load in countries and prevent spread to humans, thereby reducing the likelihood that this particular highly pathogenic avian influenza will mutate into a virus capable of spreading not only from birds to humans, but then from person to person.

Before I speak more about our international efforts, including those related to China, I'd just like to say a few words about the steps we're taking domestically to protect against the introduction of the Asian H5N1 avian influenza virus into the U.S. poultry population. These programs—many of them longstanding—are every bit as critical as the efforts we're undertaking overseas to help protect the United States.

USDA is keeping potentially infected poultry and poultry products from countries affected by the Asian H5N1 virus out of the United States through import restrictions. We quarantine and test all live birds imported into the United States to ensure that they are disease-free. We carry out an aggressive surveillance program that looks for any signs of illness in the commercial U.S. poultry flock. We're also on the lookout for smuggled birds or products from overseas that could harbor the disease.

USDA also maintains a stockpile of avian influenza vaccine should the need arise to vaccinate commercial poultry as part of a virus control and eradication effort. And, we are making sure that our State-level response plans in the event of a disease detection are constantly updated and take into account all the steps necessary to address the situation.

In total, the funding I mentioned a moment ago also directs \$73 million to USDA to enhance these and our other domestic avian influenza related efforts.

H5N1 Avian Influenza in China: Timeline

I think the best way to frame our discussion of avian influenza in China is to trace significant developments in chronological fashion. I'll then be happy to answer your more specific questions.

Evidence seems to suggest that the Asian H5N1 avian influenza virus emerged in southern China and Hong Kong in 1997. We know, too, that the virus did not start causing mortality in large numbers of birds in China until late 2003. In response to the escalating animal health situation, in January, 2004, APHIS and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued emergency import restrictions on poultry and poultry products from China and seven other countries in east and southeast Asia.

It's important to note here, however, that APHIS has had longstanding prohibitions in place on live poultry and poultry products from China (as well as most other Asian countries) due to the widespread presence of exotic Newcastle disease, another significant poultry disease, in that region of the world. So no significant quantities of live poultry or poultry products from China or other countries in southeast Asia were being imported into the United States. Again, though, in 2004 we felt it a prudent step to issue the emergency import restrictions due to the threat the Asian H5N1 virus poses to animal health, as well as concerns by public health officials that the virus could potentially have human health implications.

Later in 2004, APHIS placed restrictions on imports from all countries reporting detections of the Asian H5N1 avian influenza virus in poultry. These further restrictions prohibit the importation of all live birds, including those previously allowed entry provided that the birds went through a lengthy post-entry quarantine period; all feathers and feather products, including those treated overseas or imported into the United States for treatment; and processed or rendered poultry products for human use or consumption.

In the summer of 2004, China requested that APHIS consider regionalizing the country to enable the trade of poultry and poultry products from areas of the country unaffected the Asian H5N1 virus. Regionalization is a tenet under the World Trade Organization's Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) standards agreement. APHIS considers all such requests, and, in order to do so, we requested on several different occasions that China provide us with information on the disease situation in the country and steps being taken in response.

China, to date, has not provided us with this information; therefore, APHIS has been unable to begin considering the regionalization request. I'd also add that while China has reported cases of the disease to the International Animal Health Organization (OIE), there has been no independent verification of those reported detections by agencies outside of China. We commend China for reporting detections to the OIE, but we also feel that officials need to be much more transparent and forthcoming with information on surveillance testing, disease control and eradication measures, and related information.

Along these same lines, I'd like to acknowledge China's lifting of its import ban on all U.S. poultry and poultry products, put in place following the detection of a high pathogenic avian influenza virus in a flock of 6,600 birds in Texas in February, 2004. That detection was quickly contained and eradicated without any further spread to poultry, or any human health implications. It is a testament to the excellent surveillance and emergency response plans we have in place for serious poultry diseases here in the United States. APHIS provided China with information on the detection and related issues in August, 2004. Chinese officials removed the ban in October, 2004, and U.S. product began moving to the country again in January, 2005.

Next Steps

As I said at the outset of my remarks, USDA believes that a coordinated effort to address Asian H5N1 avian influenza in poultry populations in affected countries is among the most important steps that can be taken to prevent against a pandemic situation. In support of this, APHIS and USDA officials have certainly been keeping an active international travel schedule. In July 2005 we attended the symposium on international animal health standards for the member economies of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group, as well as the October 2005 meeting of senior officials from the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza, a group of key nations and international organizations launched by the United States in September 2005. In addition, USDA participated in a November 2005 meeting on avian influenza and human pandemic influenza organized by the OIE, the World Health Organization, the FAO, and the World Bank. We were also a part of the WHO's December, 2005, meeting to develop an international unified strategy to control the Asian H5N1 virus in birds.

In regard to China, APHIS and USDA officials met with their counterparts in Beijing in November, 2005, as part of a poultry health symposium. Much discussion took place on issues such as regulatory measures, disease surveillance, and international animal health requirements for the disease. This meeting was followed by the WTO Ministerial meeting in Hong Kong in December, 2005. During the meeting, an annex was approved to the Memorandum of Understanding in place between USDA and China's ministry of agriculture. The annex details the formulation of working groups that will meet on a regular basis to discuss technical animal and plant health issues. We are currently working to arrange the first meeting of the animal health working group and our goal is to engage in a sustained dialogue with our Chinese counterparts on many important issues, chief among them domestic surveillance in China for Asian H5N1 avian influenza.

It is our strong desire that this type of regular communication with Chinese officials will help encourage further transparency on the animal disease front. It is our hope, too, that China will engage more fully in the international efforts to formulate effective strategies against the Asian H5N1 avian influenza virus.

With that, I'll conclude my statement. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. I look forward to your questions.