

Bird flu has infected Idaho dairy farms: Is the state prepared for an outbreak?

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Bird flu virus has been a longstanding issue in Idaho, having plagued Idaho's poultry and waterfowl populations for years. But this year's strain is bringing something new—its ability to infect cows.

Since cows from a Texas dairy farm in March marked the first U.S. case of a cow infected with H5N1, the latest strain, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the virus has spread to 12 states, including Idaho. Dairy workers and [public health officials](#) are now grappling with how to protect an industry worth billions of dollars to the state, according to the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation.

Cassia County dairy cows were the first to become infected after exposure to Texas-imported cattle in March, and the virus has now spread to at least 21 other dairy operations in Idaho—many of which have not been exposed to out-of-state cattle, according to the Department of Agriculture.

State officials and the Dairymen's Association told the Idaho Statesman dairy farms are doing their best to reduce the spread of H5N1.

"As best we can, we're trying to help out dairy operations to protect their workers and make sure they have the information on hand," Idaho State Epidemiologist Christine Hahn told the Idaho Statesman, "and can decide the things that are really most critical ... (to) keep infection potentially from spreading from facility to facility."

Dairies struggle with losses from H5N1

Cows sick with H5N1 can significantly impact dairy farm revenue. The hardest-hit dairies can lose up to 20% of their milk production for up to a month, Rick Naerebout, chief executive officer of the Idaho Dairymen's Association, told the Statesman. The American Association of Bovine Practitioners estimated that H5N1 infections can cause a financial loss of up to \$200 per cow.

But Idaho dairy farmers have been reluctant to report H5N1 cases and to give [regulatory agencies](#) open access to their operations. That access can

include "invasive" requests from the USDA for nasal swabs and blood tests on workers and regular testing of cows, Naerebout said. He said [dairy farmers](#) in Idaho would be willing to provide anonymous data and analysis testing but wouldn't want to be identified.

Farmers also haven't yet seen the compensation they were promised from the USDA, Naerebout added, which is partly why they're hesitant to share more information. The USDA is required to compensate farmers for 90% of lost milk production that is due to H5N1, but dairy farms in Idaho have yet to see open applications for lost milk reimbursement, Naerebout said.

Marissa Perry, a spokesperson for the USDA, told the Statesman by email that the agency is working to make the funding available soon. Naerebout declined to say how much compensation he's expecting dairy farms to need.

"There's been little upside for dairy producers coming forward and inviting agencies on their dairy," Naerebout told the Statesman. "Just because there is a hesitation to invite federal agencies into our operation doesn't mean that the dairymen aren't doing the right thing and taking all the proper precautions to try and prevent spread to other dairies and their workers."

Idaho responds to H5N1 cases

Hahn, the state epidemiologist, said the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare is working with the Department of Agriculture and the Dairymen's Association to provide [personal protective equipment](#). The Dairymen's Association has also helped to provide protective equipment to its members through the National Stockpile, a national repository, Hahn said.

Idaho's State Veterinarian Scott Leibsle noted that many dairy workers wore protective equipment even before reported H5N1 cases because cows often carry other viruses or bacteria.

While there has yet to be a positive human case in Idaho, any infected workers will be offered the antiviral Tamiflu at no cost, Hahn said, which was recommended by the CDC. If workers know they were exposed or think they might be sick, they can reach out to their health district and provide a sample, Hahn told the Statesman. The sample is sent to a public health lab, and the results can be received as quickly as within 24 hours.

But Idaho's restrictions remain looser than some states. At the height of cattle exhibition season, Minnesota, for example, is restricting cattle shows, and requiring cows to have negative H5N1 test results and a Certificate of Veterinary Inspection, according to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Most of Idaho's H5N1 safety protocols, like personal protection equipment, are recommendations and not requirements.

"What the farm workers do is really their business," Hahn said.

What we know about bird flu

One hurdle to stopping the spread of bird flu is the lack of information about how it's transmitted among cows. The virus spreads in birds through their saliva, mucous and feces. According to the CDC, that's likely how cows were initially infected in March, through contaminated food and water sources—but it's unclear how the virus has spread since then.

"While birds may still be spreading the virus, we're still trying to figure it

out," Leibsle told the Statesman. "Is it from cattle movement, virus on your boots or your tires or on equipment?"

Identifying contamination risks and stiffening up protocols on personal protective equipment will be important for containing the spread in Idaho, Leibsle said.

To get a better understanding of virus spread, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare has started to look for H5N1 in wastewater samples, Hahn said, which is a testing technique that gained popularity during COVID-19. H5N1 has shown up "a few times in one of the Boise wastewater treatment plants," Hahn said, though the agency hasn't identified the source of the particles.

Testing for H5N1 in wastewater could someday give valuable information about the presence and spread of the virus and inform officials about a potential outbreak, Hahn told the Statesman.

If an outbreak were to happen, "we're feeling much more confident than COVID-19 that we would be able to respond quickly should we start to see cases in humans," Hahn said.

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