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Remarks

Remarks as Prepared for Associate Administrator Jere Dick International Conference on Avian Influenza and Poultry Trade

BALTIMORE, MD, June 22, 2015—Good evening, everyone.

Thank you for investing the time and effort to attend this international conference on avian influenza and poultry trade, cohosted by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and the U.S. poultry industry.

It's an honor to address such a distinguished audience.

I'm pleased to acknowledge Dr. Brian Evans, the Deputy Director General for Animal Health, Veterinary Public Health, and International Standards at the World Organization for Animal Health, known to many of you as OIE. I'd also like to acknowledge Dr. Subhash Morzaria, Senior Animal Health Advisor for the Animal Health Service of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization.

More than 50 representatives from animal health organizations around the world are attending this conference. They include more than a dozen chief veterinary medical officers and many other animal health officials, from more than 35 countries. Also attending are about 150 participants from Federal and State agencies, academia, trade associations and organizations, and the poultry industry.

For the next 2 days, we'll exchange our technical knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints on how to best keep international trade flowing safely and smoothly when avian influenza detections occur.

That means taking a rigorously scientific, dispassionate look at what the real risks are for introducing avian influenza viruses through trade in poultry and poultry products. It also means looking at the measures we can take to mitigate those risks. That includes sharing what we've learned from dealing with avian influenza firsthand in our countries: the challenges we've faced, the responses we've mounted, and the lessons we've learned.

The animal health community bears tremendous responsibility for helping ensure that our food supplies remain safe and that our countries' economies can prosper. By working together, we are infinitely better equipped to ensure the public's trust.

As part of that responsibility, I hope that we can arrive at some new approaches to ensuring that poultry trade among our countries remains as open as possible.

The Current Situation

Many of you here have experienced firsthand the devastation that highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) causes.

Around the world, millions upon millions of birds have died. Commercial poultry industries, live bird markets, and backyard producers have all borne economic costs that are truly beyond measure.

As Dr. Clifford mentioned, the current HPAI outbreak here in the United States has had a tremendous impact on our industry, our economy, our farmers and their families, and our consumers.

We think this outbreak could be the largest animal health emergency our Government has ever faced.

I regret to say that it probably sounds like an all-too-familiar scenario to some of you.

However, I want to emphasize two important points about this outbreak. First, the disease has *not* been detected in the majority of U.S. States. Second, the disease is present *only* in certain parts of the States affected by HPAI.

This leads me to a simple truth that applies the world over: where disease is absent, birds are healthy. And where birds are healthy, they and their products can be safely traded.

International Trade and HPAI

So, given the facts about HPAI—including the immutable reality that we can't at present eradicate it from the planet—how do we ensure that our international poultry trade remains vigorous, open, and based in science?

The United States is firmly committed to following the guidelines that OIE has established for trade in live poultry and poultry products as it relates to avian influenza, including HPAI. These guidelines call for countries to base in sound science any trade restrictions they might impose. The guidelines further set out a number of parameters for when trade restrictions should or should not be imposed.

To provide just a couple of examples for the non-technical members of our audience: OIE guidelines specify that import restrictions are appropriate where HPAI is detected in poultry, meaning “domesticated animals...for consumption of meat and eggs.” This does not, however, include detections in wild birds. The guidelines also provide procedures for heat-processing products to destroy the HPAI virus and prevent unnecessary disruptions in trade, in accordance with those guidelines.

Whenever science tells us that the risk of poultry disease transmission is minimal, there is no disease-related reason to disrupt trade. In fact, there is every reason to continue trade.

The impacts of restricting trade affect not only exporting industries, but all the industries that supply and rely on them as well. Most obviously, profits and jobs are lost. But there are also numerous other impacts that might not be so apparent. As just one example: a HPAI-related ban on exports of day-old chicks and hatching eggs from one country could lead to considerable domestic shortages in poultry production in another. The bottom line is that it benefits us all to keep our poultry trade as unrestricted as possible while painstakingly managing risk.

In that regard, the OIE guidelines also call for limiting trade restrictions on poultry and poultry products to within a defined zone, or region, where HPAI is present and there might be a risk of spreading it through trade. Given the ongoing presence of HPAI in our lives, that concept is key to keeping international trade moving.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the many trade partners who have zoned the United States for HPAI at this time, based on the extensive information we've shared about HPAI detections in various States and localities and the stringent measures we've taken to control and eradicate the disease in those areas. We have worked hard to provide you with the scientific data you need to ensure that the risk of any HPAI introduction has been effectively mitigated.

I'm pleased that we'll have an entire session tomorrow dedicated to reviewing OIE's international standards for HPAI risk mitigation. Among many other things, we'll also be hearing about how zoning arrangements have worked between our country and Canada in light of the current U.S. outbreak, and how an HPAI outbreak in one part of Britain affected trade.

I believe these presentations and others will provide special insights into the true nature of trade-related HPAI risks and why evaluating those risks from a purely scientific standpoint is so important to us all.

Sharing the HPAI Experience

Let me talk for a minute about a crucial aspect of managing trade risks. That is—ensuring we effectively detect, respond to, control and, whenever possible, eradicate HPAI whenever it appears in our countries.

Our participants from Africa, Europe, the Americas, and of course Asia have a wealth of information to share about their respective infrastructures and networks for dealing with HPAI. They will be talking about their experiences in a series of panels tomorrow and the next day.

We want to learn as much as possible about how they detect HPAI, disease pathways they have identified, biosecurity and quarantine measures they have employed to mitigate disease spread, and more.

I'd like to stress that hearing from them about what didn't work will be just as important as hearing about what did.

On the U.S. side, our presenters will share with you our current situation, how we got there, and the many measures we've taken to detect, respond to, and control HPAI.

We'll also be discussing our National Poultry Improvement Plan, which is the linchpin of our commercial poultry surveillance and biosecurity system. It's helped ensure that over the years, our country has experienced relatively few significant outbreaks of serious poultry diseases such as HPAI.

Conclusion

It's our hope that these discussions—and many more we will doubtless have in the course of this conference—will provide all of us with new insights into the risks that avian influenza poses, and does not pose, to trade in poultry and poultry products. We also hope that the top-rank professionals assembled here will synthesize these insights into recommendations for mitigating the risks that avian influenza holds for such trade. We plan to present these recommendations, along with a summary of our proceedings, to the OIE, to international stakeholders, and of course to all of you.

Every day—through conferences such as this one, ongoing dialogue and cooperation, and sharing lessons learned—the international community is refining its approach to avian influenza. Every day, we are learning how we can better cope with this disease, in this country and in yours, and with its risks. And every day, we are making progress on ensuring the kind of safe, secure, and open poultry trade that helps our economies and our people to thrive.

It's an essential undertaking, and I am grateful that you are partnering with us.

Thank you.

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