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Remarks

Remarks as Prepared for Associate Administrator Michael Gregoire Alabama Farmers Federation 2015 Legislative Conference

WASHINGTON, D.C., May 20, 2015— Hello and thank you for inviting me. I'm very pleased to be here. Today, I'd like to update you on some of the key issues that my Agency—the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)—has been working on.

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI)

One of our highest priorities needs no introduction: highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI).

As you know, there have been ongoing HPAI H5 detections along the Pacific, Central, and Mississippi Flyways since mid-December 2014, and 20 States have now had cases in wild birds, captive wild birds, backyard poultry, and commercial poultry.

To date, over 30 million birds have been culled as a result of the confirmed presence of HPAI strains. Turkey facilities in Minnesota and South Dakota have been hit especially hard. The virus has also been identified in commercial table egg layer flocks—specifically in large facilities in Iowa and Minnesota.

Although Alabama has not been affected by this HPAI outbreak, I know that your poultry producers are following the situation closely and are interested in hearing what APHIS is doing to combat the existing outbreak and prevent the disease's spread.

HPAI Update

APHIS has significant experience responding to animal disease outbreaks like the one we're facing. So far, we've deployed several hundred employees who are working in close coordination with State and local officials as well as our industry partners.

Two weeks ago, our Veterinary Services program issued a policy for HPAI mitigation. This policy relies on three key principles:

1. Prevent contact between HPAI viruses and susceptible poultry—Rapid mass depopulation and disposal of infected and potentially infected poultry is required to stop the production of HPAI.
2. Stop the production of HPAI virus by infected or exposed animals—Quarantine of infected poultry, movement controls, and biosecurity measures reduce the risk that susceptible poultry will come into contact with the virus.
3. Increase the disease resistance of susceptible poultry to the HPAI virus—We are considering issuing strategic emergency vaccination guidance for select States and poultry sectors to increase the disease resistance in poultry.

HPAI—Potential Fall Outbreak

As the summer heats up, we believe the detections will decrease but we recognize that many producers are already thinking about the possibility of the virus returning in the fall. Like the rest of you, APHIS is hoping that the virus doesn't return with cooler temperatures, but I assure you that we are preparing as if that's a real possibility.

So what's our plan?

Our plan is to learn all that we can now about these strains of the virus and how they are spreading, then apply those lessons to address a fall outbreak, should it occur.

One way we're doing this is by investigating virus pathways—how viruses are entering into poultry operations and the potential transmission of virus from farm to farm—referred to as lateral spread.

Currently, there's no definitive evidence to point to one pathway. Rather, poultry operations have a variety of inputs including air, feed, people, birds, and water, among others. Any of these may be the pathway of virus introduction for a single operation.

We will obtain a much better idea about how to control virus spread and enhance our biosecurity practices by conducting epidemiological studies and experiments to determine the actual pathways.

Some industry members have also expressed an interest in vaccination. We're considering issuing Emergency Vaccination Guidance for select States and poultry sectors and are currently requesting stakeholder and industry feedback on that option.

The decision on vaccination is not an easy one. There's a limited inventory of the current vaccine and the vaccine that is available isn't specific to the H5 subtypes that we're currently combating and is not as effective in turkeys as we would like. It's imperative that we balance the limits of the available vaccine's effectiveness with the potential trade repercussions that vaccination might have.

For example, in a previous outbreak of low pathogenic avian influenza, APHIS used vaccine in a single facility in Connecticut and it had ramifications on trade for the entire State. So while we want to use every tool in our arsenal to control the outbreak, we also want to minimize any disruptions to trade and ensure that our trading partners are confident in our ability to control the virus.

APHIS has to carefully consider all of this, as well as stakeholder feedback, before we make a final decision on vaccination. I assure you that we will carefully weigh everything as we look to what the future might bring in terms of additional outbreaks.

We've had significant experience responding to animal disease outbreaks like the one we are now facing. If wild birds migrating south this fall continue to spread HPAI through the flyways, we'll be prepared to respond.

I know many of you may be concerned about the manpower such a disease response requires. For many years, APHIS has maintained a database of qualified volunteers who can be quickly deployed as temporary USDA employees in such an emergency—it's called the National Animal Health Emergency Response Corps. These are primarily veterinary medical officers and animal health technicians from States and private practice.

These individuals are trained by APHIS on a variety of skills, including training on the Incident Command System, so that they have the knowledge and authority they need to act as emergency responders.

We're also currently hiring additional staff and have a long roster of experienced contractors who will be in place to assist with any necessary HPAI response this fall.

By applying its scientific expertise, leveraging the assistance of its cooperators, and responding aggressively with boots on the ground, we've had great success in containing and eradicating disease outbreaks, protecting the health of U.S. livestock, addressing public concerns, and preserving export markets.

We are confident that by working together with our State and industry partners, we can successfully apply what we've learned from other disease outbreaks to this situation.

Feral Swine—National Program

While we're focusing significant resources on responding to the ongoing HPAI outbreak, APHIS continues the rest of its mission and is making great progress on other important priorities.

I'd like to touch now on one of the issues that I think is of particular interest in Alabama—feral swine.

As a State that has large numbers of feral swine, you know how devastating their damage can be. Of the \$1.5 billion in damage and other costs feral swine cause per year, we estimate that \$800 million of this amount is direct damage to agriculture. In Alabama, these animals are responsible for \$44 million in damage to agriculture each year.

APHIS is also concerned about the disease threats these pigs pose—feral swine carry a host of serious diseases that can be easily transmitted to domestic pigs. We're particularly concerned about five diseases: swine brucellosis, pseudorabies, classical swine fever, swine influenza, and porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome.

For all these reasons, we've made combating feral swine one of our top 10 goals. If you're unfamiliar with our top 10, these are goals that we are focusing on for the next 4 years because we believe that they are achievable and will provide the most value to our customers.

Our feral swine goal is to develop a national, cooperative cost-share feral swine program that will combat the extensive damage caused by these animals. This initiative has multiple performance goals including eliminating feral swine from 2 states every 5 years and; thereafter, from 2 states every 3 years; stabilizing feral swine damage within 10 years; establishing feral swine disease monitoring in all major swine producing areas; and developing or modifying a new control technique annually.

A year ago, APHIS announced the establishment of a National Feral Swine Damage Management Program and dedicated approximately \$20 million of our budget to the program in fiscal years (FY) 2014 and 2015.

In December 2014, we published for public comment a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS). The DEIS evaluates the environmental impacts of five options for reducing feral swine damage, including the creation of a National feral swine program. The comment period closed this past February.

APHIS personnel are currently reviewing all of the comments received. We hope to publish a Record of Decision this summer.

In the meantime, we've moved forward with incorporating all aspects of feral swine work—operational removal, research, disease monitoring, and research—under a single national umbrella with the understanding that changes may occur as we respond to the comments received on the EIS.

Our strategy is to provide resources and expertise at a national level, while allowing flexibility to manage operational activities from a local or State perspective.

In States where feral swine are present, we'll implement activities to reduce problems associated with them, and in States where feral swine are emerging or populations are low, we'll cooperate with local and State agencies to implement strategies to eliminate them.

While there's still a way to go, we've had some early successes in addressing the feral swine problem.

Currently we have the capacity to respond to feral swine in 41 States, 4 of which are likely to be declared feral swine free by the end of FY15. This includes Washington, Idaho, Maryland, and Wisconsin.

Through partner cooperation, we have access to 124.5 million acres for feral swine activities.

In addition, our National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) is moving closer to a feral swine toxicant. To date, NWRC has identified an active ingredient formulation and submitted it to the Environmental Protection Agency for registration.

They've also developed an inexpensive and mobile toxicant delivery system specific to feral swine.

Feral Swine—Alabama

In Alabama, APHIS has dedicated \$295,000 in baseline funding to initiate an operational feral swine control program, with an additional \$37,000 to implement a project protecting hardwood ecosystems from feral swine damage.

As you know, our Wildlife Services (WS) Alabama State Office is also working with your organization to implement a project to assist with agricultural damage caused by feral swine.

Further, we plan to establish one of our three national pilot projects in Alabama in 2016 to demonstrate success in reducing damages by suppressing feral swine populations

I'm also pleased that our Alabama WS office has hired 4 additional employees specifically to address feral swine issues in the State and they are currently working in 7 locations across Alabama.

We're confident that by continuing to work cooperatively with our Alabama counterparts, we'll successfully reduce damage caused by feral swine. We know it's a priority for producers and our other State partners in Alabama, and I assure you that it continues to be a priority for APHIS.

Conclusion

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to join you today and provide an update on some of the important issues APHIS is working on.

We're an ambitious agency and we're tackling a lot of important priorities at once right now. With help from State partners like you, I know that we can ensure that American agriculture continues to thrive.

But it isn't my ambition to keep talking when I'm sure you have questions to ask.

So, I invite you to make this a true dialogue by asking any questions you may have and telling me what's important to you.

Thank you.

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