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APHIS Reminds All Animal Caretakers of the Importance of Biosecurity in Protecting Animals from HPAI

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In light of recent detections at captive wildlife facilities, biosecurity remains the best defense against HPAI for all animals

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WASHINGTON, December 13, 2024 – The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is reminding all animal caretakers of the critical importance of biosecurity in protecting animals from Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1. This reminder follows the confirmation by USDA’s National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL) of HPAI H5N1 detections in several species of big cats and other animals in captive wildlife facilities.

Many species are susceptible to influenza viruses, including big cats. Cats can be exposed to HPAI through various pathways, including the consumption of infected birds or other animals, and unpasteurized or raw milk from infected cows. The [CDC advises](#) against feeding raw milk and raw food to animals. A list of detections of HPAI in mammals in the United States is available on the [USDA website](#).

Each of these facilities tested the animals after they showed signs of illness. Since initial samples were taken, a number of the big cats and animals at these facilities have died, though some have also recovered. APHIS is supporting epidemiologic investigations as it is invited to help determine how these animals were exposed to the virus, though in at least one instance an animal was seen consuming a wild bird. The facilities are located in different states, including Arizona, California, Idaho, and Washington, and APHIS is providing support to the states as requested for additional sampling and to help determine how the animals were exposed to the virus.

These private wildlife facilities are regulated and licensed under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). Under the AWA, regulated facilities are required to monitor animals for signs of disease, promptly report problems of animal health and well-being to the attending veterinarian, and to follow veterinary instructions for care. The AWA does not give APHIS authority over biosecurity measures, disease surveillance, outbreak management, or animal movement at regulated facilities such as zoos. However, APHIS officials support animal welfare by facilitating contact between AWA regulated facility representatives, state animal health officials, and APHIS programs. APHIS also provides outreach and educational materials such as fact sheets, Tech Notes, and Animal Aids on best practices.

USDA APHIS has been working closely with the relevant state agriculture agencies, state and local public health agencies to confirm the detections and discuss the importance of biosecurity. For now, these facilities are either closed to the public or pausing guest activities with direct animal contact.

In light of these detections, APHIS is reminding all animal caretakers of the importance of biosecurity for all animal facilities and farms. Biosecurity continues to be the best weapon against the spread of H5N1 to any susceptible species. Data collected since March 2024 has shown that H5N1 can be transmitted on equipment, people, or other items that move from place to place. All facilities should practice good biosecurity even if the virus has not been detected in their state or vicinity, this includes following proper [cleaning and disinfecting procedures](#) (224.29 KB) and [infection control practices](#) (215.95 KB).

More information about biosecurity best practices that apply to these types of facilities can be found in this resource guide [Guidance for Zoos and Captive Wildlife Facilities](#) (552.5 KB) and in the informational video [Understanding and Reducing the Risk of H5N1 Avian Influenza in Petting Zoos](#).

USDA will continue to work to protect the health of animals and work closely with its federal partners at CDC to protect the health of people involved in the care of those animals.

USDA's NVSL serves as an international reference laboratory and provides expertise and guidance on diagnostic techniques, as well as confirmatory testing for foreign and emerging animal diseases. Such testing is required for certain animal diseases in the United States to comply with national and international reporting procedures. USDA reports all confirmed detection of HPAI H5N1 in new species to the World Organisation for Animal Health.

Please see USDA's website for [frequently asked questions](#) about H5N1 for facilities regulated under the Animal Welfare Act for more information, as well as for more details regarding detections of HPAI H5N1 in [mammalian species](#).