



Defend the Flock Newsletter Fall/Winter Edition 2022

# Defend the Flock: Your Biosecurity Bulletin

## Q&A Vet for a Day: A Talk with Dr. Koren Custer

We asked Dr. Koren Custer, former HPAI National Incident Coordinator at USDA APHIS, what it is like to “Defend our Flocks.”



**1. What inspired you to specialize in veterinary medicine?** *I grew up in a very small town in West Virginia nestled in the Ohio River Valley. My grandfather was an old-school veterinarian in the James Herriott style who traveled up and down the Ohio River serving the many dairy farmers in the area. I grew up hearing his stories and playing in his veterinary office, and knew from as early as I can*

*remember that I wanted to be a veterinarian like him. Some of the highlights of my career were working with the same dairy farmers that my grandfather had served decades earlier!*

**2. How did you become involved with USDA APHIS and what is your current role?** *I was the Assistant State Veterinarian for the state of West Virginia for a few years before applying for a federal position as a Field Veterinary Medical Officer in southeast Georgia. I have since served in several roles with USDA APHIS, and currently am the District 1 Director with our Field Operations unit. During the 2022 HPAI response, I've served as the National Incident Coordinator. As such, I've been responsible for coordinating the federal aspects of the response and have served as a point of contact for our State Animal Health Officials and industry stakeholders.*

**3. You assisted with the 2014/2015 HPAI outbreak. How did that prepare you for your current role as National Incident Coordinator?** *I was deployed three times in 2015, once to Minnesota and twice to Iowa, where I served in various roles including case manager. I saw firsthand the impact that outbreak had on affected producers, and I've tried to carry that knowledge with me in this 2022 response. I never want to lose focus on the impact that every decision has for our stakeholders.*

*This 2022 response is different in so many ways than that of 2014/2015. While the total number of birds affected by the virus is less this year, the number of affected states and affected flocks is greater in 2022. We've also seen a much greater number of backyard flocks affected this year, so folks not associated with our larger poultry industry have experienced an impact that they've never seen before.*



**If you see signs of illness in your birds, take action right away and report sick birds at **866-536-7593** or visit the **Defend the Flock website** on [aphis.usda.gov](http://aphis.usda.gov) for resources.**

**4. Did lessons learned in 2015 reduce the scope of the 2022 outbreak?** *We saw much less farm-to-farm transmission this year than what occurred in 2014/2015. Not only have there been improvements in biosecurity by the poultry industry, but APHIS, state partners, and industry stakeholders did a lot of work in “peace time” to prepare and improve our collective response capabilities. I'm confident that all these efforts lessened the opportunity for farm-to-farm transmission and contributed to the successes we've seen this year in fighting this virus.*

*continued*

## Report Sick Birds

If you see signs of illness, take action right away!

Veterinarian  
Cooperative Extension Office  
State Veterinarian/Animal or Poultry Diagnostic Lab  
USDA

Phone Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

866.536.7593





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5. APHIS has deployed many personnel to assist with the response. Can you tell me about the work these responders have been doing? The APHIS and state personnel who have fought this virus at the ground level are the unsung heroes of this response. There are many different types of jobs these responders engage in, but regardless of the job that they're doing, the work is difficult and the days are long. These individuals are also assisting producers through what can be the worst times in their lives, so the emotional toll is great too,

I cannot emphasize enough how important biosecurity and biosecurity plans are for success against this virus.

- Dr. Koren Custer

APHIS personnel can be deployed anywhere from 21 to 28 days and have been deployed multiple times. The days and months spent away from their homes and families stack up quickly. Even for the individuals that are not deployed but are fighting this battle in their own backyards, the cost is great. Their days, nights, weekends and holidays are dedicated to this response and life does not go back to normal for many months.

6. If HPAI is detected at a farm or facility, what can flock owners expect? Quick action is key and impacted producers can expect a flurry of activity on their premises. A detection of HPAI on one's farm is extremely difficult and stressful, and we in APHIS try very hard to be as respectful, open, and communicative as possible with folks in this situation. Immediately upon every new detection, a state or APHIS case manager is assigned to the affected premises. This individual is the liaison for the impacted flock owner so that they are fully involved in the response and aware of everything that will need to happen on their farm, and so that they have a voice about what's happening on their facility.

Unfortunately, a flock owner doesn't have to own infected birds to be affected by HPAI. A control area is created around each infected premise with the intent of monitoring the area for spread of the disease and limiting the potential for this spread as much as possible. Nearby flocks are tested, and movement restrictions are put in place. While it is an inconvenience for those in the area, it is one of the most important actions that can be taken to ensure that the virus doesn't spread like wildfire throughout the area.

7. What can flock owners do to prepare for future outbreaks of HPAI? I cannot emphasize enough how important biosecurity and biosecurity plans are for success against this virus. Biosecurity is what keeps a ensure the virus.

Important, too, is planning for the worst-case scenario. It's imperative that you work with your local state and APHIS personnel, and your industry representatives, to have a plan in place so that if your farm becomes impacted, you can hit the ground running and not lose crucial days. If you don't know who your local APHIS point of contact is, you can start here: [www.aphis.usda.gov/animal\\_health/contacts/field-operations-districts.pdf](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/contacts/field-operations-districts.pdf). They will work with you to answer any questions that you might have regarding HPAI preparedness for your farm.

Birds infected with the HPAI virus may show one or more of the following signs:

- Sudden death
- Lack of energy and appetite
- Decreased egg production
- Soft-shelled or misshapen eggs
- Swelling of head, comb, eyelid, wattles, and hocks
- Purple discoloration of wattles, comb, and legs
- Nasal discharge, coughing, and sneezing
- Incoordination
- Diarrhea

For more information about how to keep your flocks healthy, follow **Defend the Flock** on **Facebook** and **Twitter** and visit [www.aphis.usda.gov/animalhealth/defendtheflock](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animalhealth/defendtheflock).

