USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Defend the Flock YOUR BIOSECURITY BULLETIN

Fall 2025

Q&A with David Marks

We talked with David Marks, Assistant State Director for Missouri and Iowa, USDA APHIS Wildlife Services, to get a unique wildlife perspective on how poultry and bird owners can help prevent the spread of avian influenza and protect their flocks.

How are flocks at increased risk for highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) this fall?

Flocks are at higher risk for HPAI in the fall because migratory birds and waterfowl move south from northern breeding grounds, and they carry the virus with them. Through wildlife surveillance, we typically see an uptick in virus in waterfowl and poultry farms, first in the northern states and then into southern states as the season goes on.

Are there certain regions more at risk? Certain hotspots?

Based on what we've seen in recent years, the virus lives longer in cooler, wetter northern climates and can even survive freezing conditions. We've seen HPAI in poultry farms in these northern latitudes. There are also known migratory stopovers for waterfowl, and those areas are at higher risk as more virus is in the environment. Peri-domestic species, those birds near human activity, can also pose a risk.

What role do peri-domestic species play?

Peri-domestic birds—like pigeons, starlings, sparrows, swallows, and robins—can act as bridges between wild and domestic environments. If there are a lot of wetlands that attract waterfowl in your region, peri-domestic birds can move from wetlands to farms increasing the risk of spreading HPAI.

But these peri-domestic birds don't necessarily host HPAI, right?

Correct, peri-domestic birds are not the host for the virus. However, they can become infected. We've tested many of these species and have found HPAI in over 200 species of birds. Peri-domestic birds, for example, might have prevalence rates as low as 1 in 10,000, but it only takes one to spread the virus. We don't think they're maintaining the virus in the environment but they could potentially move the virus between the waterfowl and the farm.

continued

HPAI HOTSPOTS

While avian flu knows no boundries, there are hot spots for farms located in or near:

Northern climates

Migratory stopovers for waterfowl

Places where peri-domestic species thrive

Report Sick Birds

If you see signs of illness, act right away!

Veterinarian	
Cooperative Extension Office	
State Veterinarian/Animal or Poultry Diagnostic Lab	
USDA	866.536.7593

DEFEND THE FLOCK

continued

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As a wildlife expert, what advice can you offer bird owners to reduce the HPAI threat?

Always assume that anything outside the barn can be contaminated—even the dirt could carry the virus if birds are nesting nearby. It's about shifting your mindset. Maybe you've only focused on having people step into a boot bath before they go into the barn. That's important, but you also need to think beyond that.

What things do you look at when doing a wildlife biosecurity assessment at a farm?

We start by walking around the farm looking for ways that wildlife can get in. We look for any holes, gaps, or openings larger than one square inch—whether in wire mesh, barn siding, broken fan louvers, or foundation boards. Those are tier one hazards. We also look for tier two and three hazards like spilled grain or exposed water sources, which attract wildlife.

Can farmers get two different biosecurity assessments from the USDA to reduce the risk to their animals for HPAI and other diseases?

Yes, USDA offers two free biosecurity assessments for producers. The first is a Wildlife Biosecurity Assessment, which I described. The second is a Biosecurity Incentive-Focused Assessment, which looks at overall biosecurity practices. Producers can request one or both. We'll visit your facility and identify actionable strategies that you can immediately implement to strengthen your operation's defenses against HPAI.

Wild birds can get into your facilities through the smallest of holes.

What should producers know about the biosecurity assessments?

All the recommendations are voluntary—there are no penalties. The goal is to help producers take proactive steps to reduce disease risk. Most assessments involve multiple visits over time because things change. Additionally, USDA will share up to 75 percent of the costs to fix the biosecurity concerns identified by the assessments. Remember, taking preventive measures to secure your operation costs far less than reacting to a disease outbreak.

It Pays to Prevent HPAI

A recent USDA Wildlife Services analysis found it costs an average of **5¢ per bird to prevent** disease compared to an average of **$8 per bird when reacting** to a disease.

For more information about how to keep your poultry healthy, follow ***Defend the Flock*** on **Facebook** and **X** and visit **www.aphis.usda.gov/animalhealth/defendtheflock.**

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