



DAFF06/1D

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## No evidence of H5N1 avian influenza in Australia

There is no evidence of the H5N1 strain of avian influenza in Australia, based on surveillance of wild birds and investigations of bird deaths, the Australian Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr Gardner Murray, said today.

“An expanded wild bird surveillance program is now in place as a cooperative effort between the States and the Australian Government, through the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service’s (AQIS) Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS), and with wildlife health networks,” Dr Murray said.

“Australia’s avian influenza policy is based on the premise that the disease could enter Australia via migratory birds, be passed to domestic wild birds such as ducks and water fowl, and then pose a potential risk to production birds.

“There is close cooperation between industry and government, and our policies are to ensure industry has biosecurity measures in place to break the migratory-bird-to-wild-bird-to-production-bird pathway.

“Authorities are focused on being forewarned of problems by gathering intelligence from overseas, ongoing surveillance in Australia plus awareness amongst farmers, shooters, ornithologists and others to report any unusual bird deaths and illness immediately to agricultural authorities.”

Dr Murray said the risk of H5N1 via migratory birds is predominately posed by shore birds and waders in Australia rather than the European experience through ducks and swans.

“It is important for us to remain vigilant,” he said. “Surveillance is, broadly speaking, in two forms: sampling from wild birds, which has been carried out for many years and recently been enhanced, as well as through reporting of suspicious, clinical signs by farmers, wildlife people and others.”

Surveillance is being conducted through NAQS targeting north Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. The States have additional programmes, and there is the Australian Wildlife Health Network with more than 600 people, some of which is funded by the Australian Government.

“Surveillance is, obviously, not 100 per cent sensitive, because we've got to select from many millions of birds. H5N1 has not been detected, and only low pathogenic subtypes of avian influenza that do not cause concern have been picked up,” Dr Murray said.

“Authorities have been alerted to recent unusual bird kills and investigations have concluded they were the result of storm deaths, poisoning and bacterial infection.”

He said Australia is closely monitoring avian influenza developments in Europe and Africa as well as maintaining an ongoing regional focus that includes supporting activities to combat the disease in Asia.

“Animal health and quarantine authorities have been monitoring and responding to the situation since the epidemic first commenced in 2003. Our national disease surveillance and reporting arrangements for avian influenza are aimed at giving us an early warning of its presence so appropriate action can be taken immediately,” he said.

“Australia had extensive experience in handling outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza and, although the H5N1 sub-type of the disease had not occurred here, Australia had proven response plans in place. These were tested recently through *Exercise Eleusis '05*.

“In addition, border protection measures have been enhanced, and there are considerable education and awareness initiatives in place to help guard against the introduction of disease into domestic poultry.”

Dr Murray called on producers, and other people with birds, to be very mindful of this disease, and report clinical signs such as a loss of production and unusual deaths whether in wild or domestic birds to State and Territory agriculture authorities, local vets, or by phoning the **1800 675 888** hotline.

**Key facts about avian influenza are attached along with a web site address for further information.**

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Australian Government  
Department of Agriculture,  
Fisheries and Forestry

# MEDIA RELEASE

## Key avian influenza facts

**Avian influenza and human pandemic influenza are different diseases.**

**Avian influenza in birds does not easily cause disease in humans.**

There have been 92 human deaths from avian influenza in the world since the H5N1 virus first emerged in 2003. This compares to millions of deaths in the same period from infectious human diseases.

**There is only the most remote possibility of a human pandemic influenza developing in Australia as a result of migratory birds carrying avian influenza virus to Australia.**

If human pandemic influenza develops as a result of mutation of an avian influenza virus, it will most likely occur somewhere else in the world and any spread to Australia would be from international travellers.

**Surveillance continues to show H5N1 avian influenza virus is not present in Australia.**

Waterfowl, which are the normal hosts of avian influenza and are thought to be spreading the H5N1 virus across Europe and Asia, do not migrate to Australia. A number of species of wading birds do migrate to Australia but they are not the normal hosts or spreaders of avian influenza. Australia's strict quarantine measures prevent the disease coming into Australia through imported birds or poultry products.

**There is little risk of people in Australia being affected by avian influenza through normal contact with birds. As always, practice good personal hygiene when handling birds.**

**Aviary birds, caged birds and back yard birds are at little risk if simple measures such as preventing them mixing with wild birds and protecting their feed and water supply are adopted.**

**Australia is well prepared to deal with a case of avian influenza should it occur in poultry here.**

There have been five small incidents of avian influenza in Australia, the last being in 1997. Each was eradicated before the disease spread. Workers involved with diseased poultry did not become infected with avian influenza in any of these outbreaks.

**Australia has a surveillance program to detect incursions of avian influenza.**

**A national training exercise, *Exercise Eleusis '05*, held at the end November 2005, better prepared Australia to respond to a case of avian influenza.**

**Public alarm about avian influenza and confusion between avian influenza and human pandemic influenza may unnecessarily damage the poultry industry.**

**Eggs, meat and poultry products in Australia remain safe.**

**Further information about avian influenza can be found at [www.outbreak.gov.au](http://www.outbreak.gov.au)**

**Ends**