VERMONT

Preparing for H5N1 Influenza Risks to Vermont Farm Workers

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House Agriculture Committee

Influenza A(H5N1) Overview

Avian influenza A viruses—also called “bird flu”—usually spread between birds and other animals.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) strains are deadly to domestic poultry

- “Highly pathogenic” refers to severe impact in birds
- It is rare for bird flu to spread to humans

Circulating strain: A(H5N1)

- H5N1 bird flu is mainly affecting animal health
- No known human-to-human spread
- Worldwide, ~900 human cases (caused by different H5N1 virus strains) reported since 1997

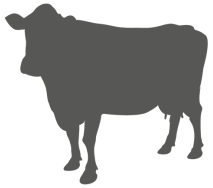
	 Wild Birds, Backyard & Commercial Poultry	 Mammals	 Dairy Cattle
A(H5N1) in the U.S.	• Circulating since 2022	• Detected in over 20 species since 2022	• First detected in Texas in March 2024
Effects in Animals	• High mortality	• Mortality in some species	• Low mortality; non-specific signs, including decreased milk production • Virus level highest in milk and mammary tissues
A(H5N1) Detections in Vermont	• 100 wild birds; 5 backyard flocks	• 1 bobcat (Jan 2024)	• None. No detections in New England

Influenza A(H5N1) human cases in the U.S.

Data as of February 6, 2025

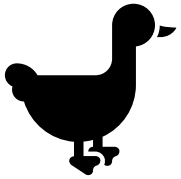
Exposures to Poultry

24 confirmed cases



Exposures to Dairy Cattle

40 confirmed cases



Exposures to Wild Birds

1 confirmed case

Unknown Exposures

3 confirmed cases

No human-to-human transmission to date

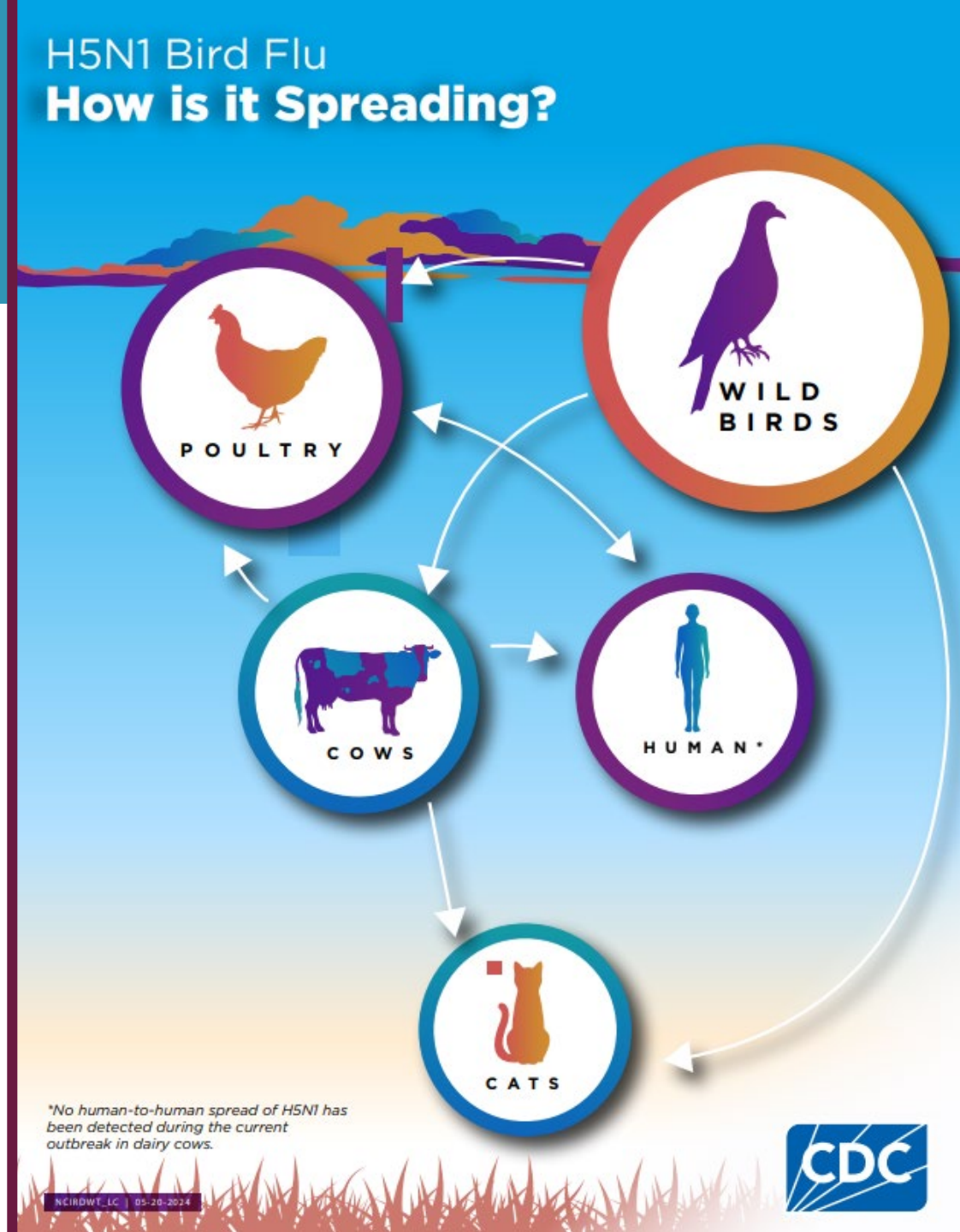
Public Health Risk

Overall risk to the public remains **low**

- Surveillance systems show no unusual influenza activity in people

Increased risk for people exposed to infected animals, animal products (e.g., raw milk), or animals' environments

Exposed individuals should monitor for symptoms after first exposure and until 10 days after last exposure



Influenza A (H5N1) Testing, Treatment, and Prevention

- Current lab tests can detect A(H5) viruses
- Health Department Laboratory can detect A(H5)

- Existing FDA-approved antiviral drugs are effective

- Candidate vaccine viruses under development

Anyone in contact with poultry or cattle can take steps to protect themselves and their community from H5N1 infection.

Wash your hands after any contact with animals or animal products.

Clean your boots or wear boot covers to prevent the spread of germs when walking into other non-work areas.

Protect your eyes and mouth by using a face shield or goggles and surgical mask to protect from splash and respiratory droplets.

Contact your veterinarian if an animal is showing signs of sickness.

If H5N1 is detected or suspected: wear personal protective equipment (PPE), including coveralls, apron, goggles or face shield, and N-95 mask

What the Health Department and the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets are doing

Department of Health and Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets are working closely to prepare for possible cases of H5N1 bird flu in Vermont dairy cattle.

- Inter-agency Coordination and Communication Protocol exists
- July 2024 joint Health/Ag letter to Vermont dairy industry offering PPE
- VAAFM conducting monthly testing of cow milk from dairy farm bulk tanks
- VAAFM testing all lactating dairy cows moving across state lines
- VDH Laboratory increased surveillance of hospitalized patients with influenza
- If the virus is detected in a dairy cow or milk, the Health Department will:
  - Work with the farm to identify people who might have been exposed.
  - Provide information and resources, including PPE.
  - Monitor people with a high risk of exposure for signs & symptoms of illness.
  - Coordinate testing for people with symptoms and recommend next steps.

July 2024 Tabletop – Emergency Planning Exercise

- Promoted collaboration between State agencies, community partners, healthcare organizations, and farms.
- Discussed response capabilities for a potential and hypothetical H5N1 outbreak on a dairy farm in Franklin County.
- Sought guidance from Bridges to Health, a prominent community partner in Franklin County, on how to best engage with all participants in the event of such an outbreak.

Strengths from the Tabletop Exercise

- Community partners, like Bridges to Health, are trusted messengers for farm workers in Vermont.
- The Department's Local Health Offices have existing relationships with community partners.
- The Health Department and Agency of Agriculture have an effective partnership to assist with notification of suspect cases and to direct an emergency response. This includes a clear delineation of each agency's responsibilities.

Weaknesses from the Tabletop Exercise

- Lack of familiarity with public health workers and public health processes among farm workers. This could impede efforts to offer education, testing or treatment to farm workers.
- Public health messaging to farm workers is often delivered in a manner that does not accommodate their unique communication needs, such as limited internet access and language access needs.
- There is limited capacity among community partners to translate health information and assist sick or symptomatic farm workers.
- Some organizations struggle with a lack of stable funding to support their operations.

Action Steps from the Tabletop Exercise

1. The Department will use WhatsApp to reach farm workers.
2. The Department will ensure quick turnaround translation of urgent communication resources.
3. The Department will ensure written resources are accessible to the audience, including the use of plain language and pictures to more easily convey complex health information.
4. Bridges to Health will help Health Department staff recognize and reduce stigmatization for farm workers and migrant groups.
5. The Department organized 51 vaccine clinics on farms in fall 2024.
    - 242 flu, 92 COVID-19, and 99 Tdap vaccines were administered to 256 individuals.

Pandemic Potential

- Science or science fiction?
- The pandemic-creating scenario during flu season
- Ways to prevent:
  - Keep surveillance at a high level, early warning system
  - High uptake of flu vaccine this season:
    - Yes, to some degree, in the higher risk population
    - No, in the general population

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Resources

VDH: HealthVermont.gov/BirdFlu
VAAFM: https://agriculture.vermont.gov/HPAIinDairyCowsAnEmergingAnimalHealthIssue
CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/bird-flu
Fact sheet for farm workers: Information for Farm Workers exposted to H5N1 Bird Flu in US Dairy Cows and other animals
USDA: https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-detections
FDA: https://www.fda.gov/food/alerts-advisories-safety-information/updates-highly-pathogenic-avian-influenza-hpai
Bridges to Health: Migrant Health Programs | University of Vermont Extension | The University of Vermont