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September 17, 2015

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Turkey and egg producers across the Midwest continue to struggle with highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), which has been labeled the worst avian health crisis in American history. Earlier this year, HPAI spread rapidly across some of the most dense egg and turkey producing regions of the country, causing extreme devastation and resulting in widespread depopulation to control the spread of HPAI. Ultimately, nearly 50 million birds were depopulated to control the spread of the disease, resulting in significant U.S. taxpayer expense for indemnity and cleanup procedures. This difficult situation has left economic devastation on farms and in rural communities in more than a dozen states.

In July, the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, held a hearing on the impact HPAI is having on the U.S. poultry sector. Following that hearing, questions remain regarding the potential threat of a recurrence of HPAI this fall and preparedness efforts underway, at both the state and federal level and on farms.

We commend you and Department officials for your dedication in responding to this crisis and for your preparations to guard against further outbreaks. USDA officials have stated that the HPAI outbreaks have been a learning experience for them as well as for the affected industries. Further, we are aware of the many joint government-industry discussions that have occurred to be better prepared for future outbreaks. We laud this effort and believe this coordinated and thoughtful approach will help ensure an efficient, timely response should we be faced with another outbreak of HPAI in the coming months.

Following these discussions with industry and your own internal deliberations, we would appreciate your responses to the following questions, which address many of the inquiries we have received from our colleagues in Congress and our constituents.

- 1. Depopulation, Disposal, Cleaning and Disinfection:** Recognizing some of the logistical challenges that USDA and the poultry industry faced in the recent outbreak, how does USDA plan to improve these processes in preparing for future outbreaks? How

is USDA working with state and industry partners, including how best to address carcass disposal?

2. **Biosecurity:** Looking back at the outbreak, preventing exposure to HPAI through enhanced biosecurity measures will be critical to the vitality of U.S. poultry producers. What near-term biosecurity improvements can be made on and around farms to safeguard poultry flocks from future exposure to HPAI during fall migration? Further, has USDA identified long-term biosecurity improvements and investments?
3. **Indemnities:** We have heard concerns that the indemnity calculation should be revised to more accurately reflect lost value over the two year reproductive life of most egg laying hens and that the high degree of deductions from the indemnity payment should be reconsidered. Does USDA believe that the indemnity funding formula adequately reflects the unique needs of the various industry segments, specifically the egg sector? We have also heard comments from producers who experienced difficulties qualifying for indemnification from USDA while simultaneously depopulating their flocks, finding alternative employment options for their employees, and navigating other challenges due to the HPAI outbreak. Has USDA identified ways to streamline the indemnification process?
4. **Vaccination:** USDA recently announced a Request for Proposal to stockpile HPAI vaccine doses in preparation for recurrence of HPAI infections this fall. Does USDA have an estimate for the costs associated with building an adequate HPAI vaccine stockpile? What is the estimated time-frame for building the vaccine stockpile? What criteria will be used to decide whether to permit or require vaccination in response to an HPAI outbreak? Finally, how does USDA plan to weigh vaccine efficacy, apprehensions raised from trading partners, and other concerns in determining whether to adopt a widespread vaccination plan?

We appreciate your timely response to these questions, and we stand ready to work with you to address any future outbreaks of this disease. Thank you again for your response to this historic crisis.

Sincerely,


Pat Roberts, Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition and Forestry


Debbie Stabenow, Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition and Forestry