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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6000

202-224-2035

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March 17, 2017

Michael Young  
Acting Deputy Secretary of Agriculture  
United States Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Acting Deputy Secretary Young:

On March 5, 2017, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) confirmed the presence H7N9 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in a commercial breeding flock of 73,000 chickens in Lincoln County, TN. This was the first confirmed case of HPAI in commercial poultry in the United States this year. A second case of HPAI was confirmed on March 16, 2017, also in Lincoln County, TN. Two cases of low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) were detected last week, in a turkey flock in Barron County, WI, and in a commercial chicken flock in Giles County, TN. Three suspected cases of avian influenza were detected this week in Alabama.

The confirmation of HPAI presents a threat to our nation's biosecurity, rural economies, and export markets. An outbreak in 2015 of a different HPAI strain had devastating consequences for the poultry industry, resulting in the depopulation of 48 million birds. Production and marketplace disruptions lingered for months, and trade restrictions on U.S. poultry products were imposed by our trading partners. Nationwide, poultry producers are still reeling from the financial consequences of the 2015 outbreak. To properly address the many issues associated with the outbreak, our government's response required a significant taxpayer investment.

The 2015 outbreak demonstrated that a rapid and coordinated response to disease outbreaks is critical. In January 2016, the USDA produced a HPAI preparedness and response plan (hereinafter "avian influenza plan"), a critical tool in working to prevent and address the serious threat of HPAI. We value the important role the USDA plays in protecting animal health and leading the response to recent outbreaks of avian influenza. The confirmed case of HPAI is yet another example of the critical role the USDA plays in the U.S. economy and the lives of all Americans.

Given the urgency of addressing the recent outbreaks of avian influenza, I ask that you provide a written response to the following questions and issues no later than March 31, 2017:

1. Who is the USDA official leading the response to HPAI? Is the official empowered to make difficult, rapid decisions on issues as they arise, such as a decision to depopulate a flock threatened by the presence of HPAI?

2. The Trump Administration recently imposed a hiring freeze on the federal government. In the 2015 avian influenza outbreak, the USDA hired hundreds of veterinarians and other temporary workers to help manage the response. Is the hiring freeze in any way making the response to this outbreak more difficult or hindering the response? Will the USDA be authorized to deploy more workers if they are needed to contain an outbreak?
3. Carcass disposal varies depending on location of the infected facility, the ability to use incinerators and landfills, and other factors. During the HPAI outbreak in 2015, some producers encountered difficulties in finding sufficient disposal capacity near their facilities. How is the USDA preparing for potential disposal needs resulting from a broader outbreak? Please explain the coordination between USDA and other relevant government agencies, including the EPA and state and local governments.
4. Which USDA official will be managing any international trade considerations that arise as a result of HPAI? Has USDA initiated conversations with other government agencies in preparation for addressing the intersection of trade and the HPAI outbreak, such as the restrictions imposed by our trading partners on U.S. poultry products?
5. Migratory waterfowl serve as a reservoir for avian influenza. Can you describe how USDA has increased its surveillance efforts in migratory waterfowl, including any outreach it has conducted to neighboring countries on this issue?
6. Producers significantly enhanced their biosecurity practices as a result of the 2015 outbreak. How has USDA been engaging with states, local communities, and producer organizations regarding the importance of enhancing biosecurity practices to protect against the threat of avian influenza? Has USDA identified any areas in need of improvement regarding biosecurity practices on farms, at ports of entry, or elsewhere?

Thank you for your attention on this important issue. If you have questions regarding this letter, please have them contact Grant Colvin on the minority staff of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry at (202) 224-2035.

Sincerely,



Debbie Stabenow  
Ranking Member