

**Testimony of John Zimmerman
Immediate Past Chairman of the National Turkey Federation**

**Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
“Perspectives from the field: Farmers and Ranchers Views on the Agricultural Economy,
Part II.”**

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Good morning, Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share the turkey industry’s perspective today. My name is John Zimmerman, and I’m a second-generation turkey grower from Northfield, Minnesota. On my farm, we raise about 100,000 turkeys annually, producing about four million pounds of turkey meat, along with corn and soybeans. Raising turkeys is a family business – I grew up in the industry and took over from my father. It’s hard work, but I love it.

I also just finished serving as the Chairman of the National Turkey Federation (NTF), representing all segments of the U.S. turkey industry – from growers like me to processors, breeders and the allied companies that produce the goods and services we use to bring turkeys from the farm to tables in this country and around the world.

While the turkey industry faces many challenges, my testimony will focus on the impacts of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) as well as another highly consequential respiratory virus - Avian Metapneumovirus (aMPV) - which has impacted between 60-80% of turkey flocks nationwide. As of February 19, 2025, 459 commercial turkey operations nationwide have tested positive for HPAI, resulting in the loss of more than 18.6 million turkeys. In Minnesota alone, 127 cases of HPAI in commercial turkeys have led to the loss of more than 6.6 million birds. While HPAI is 100% lethal to birds exposed to the virus long enough, aMPV is more subtle but equally impactful due to its ability to significantly reduce egg sets of breeder stock that produce the next generation of turkeys and cause severe prolonged mortality in commercial flocks.

As chairman of NTF and a grower, I cannot overstate the impact of these two viral animal diseases that have killed millions of turkeys nationwide. While HPAI grabs headlines for its effect on egg and milk prices, aMPV has also killed millions of turkeys. Together, these two respiratory viruses have exponentially increased volatility, supply shortages, and market uncertainty.

Back in Minnesota, this one-two punch has caused many farmers to quit raising turkeys, with several others on the brink of shutting down. Banks are very concerned about farms' financial health and some farmers struggle to obtain credit after losing 30-50 percent of their flocks to aMPV. I have personally had flocks of turkeys experience 30 percent mortality in just a matter of days. HPAI is a terrible disease, but with aMPV there is no indemnity or assistance. It has been incredibly frustrating to suffer such extreme losses knowing that a safe and effective vaccine was available, just not to U.S. farmers. I have received calls from many other farmers who are frustrated and disheartened by their continued losses due to aMPV.

On a more positive note, the first imported aMPV modified-live vaccine doses reached Minnesota farms this month, with more on the way to assist farmers nationwide. I want to personally thank the Chairman and my home state senator Ranking Member Klobuchar for leading the charge in supporting the importation of the much needed modified-live vaccine for aMPV. As the industry recovers from aMPV, we urge the Committee to make aMPV an eligible disease under the USDA's Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP). This would assist growers in mitigating economic loss and it will go a long way to assist poultry producers, who are being hit hard, stay on their farms producing the most abundant food supply in the world.

I also want to thank USDA, specifically those at the Center for Veterinary Biologics (CVB), for their efforts getting this across the finish line. We are hopeful this new tool will ensure many more turkeys make it to market and puts us on the path to controlling the virus. However, I also think it's important to acknowledge the industry's frustrations with USDA's review process of an imported modified-live vaccine. I appreciate the importance of ensuring the safety of a vaccine and that the aMPV vaccine was the first of its kind to be approved. However, when an entire industry is at significant risk it should take a matter of months – not a year – for a widely used and well-established global vaccine to be imported and available for use. I would encourage the committee to use your experience in evaluating USDA's review process to ensure a faster, more efficient response to future animal disease outbreaks. Unfortunately, we know that MPV will not be the last emerging animal disease U.S. producers will face, and preparedness is essential.

Unfortunately, aMPV is only half the battle – time is of the essence on HPAI. A national strategy targeting all potential hosts of H5 influenza is lacking, allowing the virus to spread. The global poultry industry is in crisis, so pursuing a successful vaccination program that does not negatively impact trade as part of a stamp-out strategy, is the key to significantly reducing disease rates.

NTF supports research on finding an effective vaccine for HPAI, improving vaccine and diagnostic technology while creating a vaccination plan for commercial poultry. As vaccine technology advances, there is growing interest in using a HPAI vaccine to prevent disease spread and reduce losses as part of a "stamping out" approach. As a parallel path, NTF strongly encourages USDA to renegotiate with key trading partners to minimize the implication of vaccine deployment.

Empowering USDA to increase proactive engagement with trading partners and solidify a new framework to reduce disease outbreaks' impact on the global food supply is essential. The U.S. can lead the fight against a disease that has devastated the global poultry industry, but proactive engagement with trade partners is needed now. Science, global politics and disease resilience demand a new approach—we cannot wait for this strain to fade. If the U.S. fails to lead globally on implementing animal health solutions capable of preventing disease and death in commercial poultry, we will be at a significant business disadvantage.

Interim Final Rule Linking Biosecurity Audits to Indemnity

In late December, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) announced an interim final rule that would update the conditions for poultry facilities to receive indemnity and compensation for HPAI. APHIS will now require farmers like me to undergo an additional biosecurity audit before restocking their poultry after an HPAI detection or if placed within a

buffer zone, and before receiving future indemnity payments. Biosecurity is currently the only tool available for the turkey industry to prevent the introduction of HPAI in our flocks, but there are still many instances in which the means of HPAI introduction is unknown. Even premises with the most stringent biosecurity programs have had HPAI detections in this outbreak, which is something I have seen in Minnesota, as the viral load in the wild bird population and environment is overwhelming.

Many of the criteria included in the new biosecurity audit are duplicative of the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) Biosecurity Principles already executed on poultry farms, and some do not reduce the likelihood of virus introduction. USDA published the Interim Final Rule without adequate resources to immediately implement the audits. Farms across the United States have started using the new biosecurity audits before they restock their birds or if they are in the buffer zone. We have heard frustrations nationwide such as the audit being subjective and that auditors have not been formally trained to complete a fair audit. The limited number of auditors has not been able to keep up with the speed of commerce, presenting significant animal welfare concerns.

USDA must recognize that a quick response is crucial to reducing the spread of the virus, and unfair indemnity changes could impact reporting and stamping out of the virus. If policies disincentivize reporting of HPAI incidences, there will be additional disease spread, directly opposing USDA's overall goals of virus elimination.

I strongly urge that any indemnity policy linked to the new biosecurity audits be fair, advance animal health and not penalize turkey farmers in high-risk areas – especially when dairies testing positive for HPAI face minimal restrictions despite posing a significant risk to nearby poultry flocks.

Readiness

Dealing with a large nationwide outbreak has put tremendous strain on APHIS, which remains significantly understaffed. The agency needs at least 150 full-time employees (FTEs) to return to normal strength and provide maximum assistance with all aspects of this outbreak. Rapid response is critical when dealing with a positive flock to minimize virus spread. Addressing the staffing shortage will ensure faster depopulation and disposal, reducing unnecessary flock mortality. We encourage Congress to provide the funding and flexibility that will allow APHIS to compete with the private sector and hire and train these desperately needed 150-plus FTEs. It not only will accelerate the end of this outbreak; but it will strengthen effective rapid response capabilities for future outbreaks. In addition to providing APHIS with the necessary financial resources, Congress should empower the agency to pursue other creative solutions such as developing cooperative agreements to train state, or even industry employees and vets so they can be called upon during animal health emergencies. In addition, efforts should be made to incentivize veterinarians to enter federal service.

Salmonella Framework

Last year USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) published its proposed Salmonella Framework for Raw Poultry Products. The turkey industry has a long-standing commitment to enhancing the safety of turkey products across the entire supply chain. I

know how seriously I take my role in ensuring the turkeys I raise can be used for safe, wholesome and nutritious products for consumers, and can assure you others do as well. Not only is the USDA proposal not legally sound, but it also contradicts multiple federal court decisions on Salmonella in raw meat and poultry products. The proposed rule lacks a scientific basis and introduces a policy that is logistically unfeasible, financially burdensome for the industry, and likely to increase food costs, waste and threaten food security.

NTF strongly agrees that new approaches to more effectively reduce foodborne illness should be explored. The Agency already has a mechanism proven to effectively reduce Salmonella. By setting clear targets developed using public health metrics, FSIS can more successfully positively impact public health by capitalizing on the achievements of current performance standards under the Agency's current authority and more rapidly elicit change. I am optimistic that USDA will recognize significant scientific and logistical challenges of the proposed rule, and that FSIS will instead move forward with a science-based policy aimed at improving public health.

2025 Farm Bill

The current HPAI outbreak is a prime example of how important the Farm Bill is to our industry and the animal agriculture community. Foreign animal diseases can devastate the agricultural sector, posing long-term threats to the economic viability of U.S. livestock and poultry production. The new Farm Bill must address these animal health risks while strengthening U.S. animal agriculture's long-term competitiveness in the global market, ensuring a safe, wholesome, and affordable food supply produced sustainably. The 2018 Farm Bill established a three-tiered animal disease program with mandatory funding to ensure sufficient development and timely deployment of all measures necessary to prevent, identify and mitigate the potential catastrophic impacts that an animal disease outbreak would have on our country's food security, export markets and overall economic stability.

As Congress writes a new Farm Bill, NTF urges the renewal and robust funding of these programs. In addition, we strongly believe, due to the magnitude of the current situation, that our Strategic Initiative for HPAI needs to be expressly defined and funded to give it the attention it needs. In conjunction with this Strategic Initiative, it is imperative that we do not backpedal on our obligations to animal agriculture, so the full funding of the National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program (NADPrep), and the National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) Laboratory Network, which is comprised of more than 60 federal, state and university veterinary diagnostic labs go hand in hand. We are extremely grateful for the support Congress has shown to our industry through this challenging HPAI outbreak. We look forward to continuing our work together on the upcoming Farm Bill.

In conclusion, the turkey industry faces numerous challenges, with the most urgent threat directly at our doorstep. Without a new approach to these critical diseases, we risk facing the same crisis next year—more dead birds, more trade restrictions and continued frustration over the lack of progress.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and share the perspective of the U.S. turkey industry.