

I welcome you all this morning to this hearing to consider the role of US agriculture in the control and eradication of avian influenza. I appreciate our witnesses who have traveled here today to present testimony on this important topic and I welcome and thank those who are listening via our website.

The topic before us today is important to all of American agriculture, but holds particular significance to my home State of Georgia. Poultry is our largest agricultural industry and the State of Georgia leads the nation in poultry production. In fact, if the state of Georgia were a country, it would be the fourth largest producer of poultry in the world. In 2004, the total farm value of poultry and eggs produced in Georgia was \$3.26 billion and the statewide economic impact of the overall poultry industry was an estimated \$13.5 billion.

In addition, Atlanta, Georgia, is home to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which plays a critical role in protecting human health against disease threats such as avian influenza and Athens, Georgia, is home to the Department of Agriculture's Southeast Poultry Research Laboratory which conducts critical research on avian diseases. My interest in this topic is understandably high not only for the Georgia poultry industry, but for the entire US poultry system.

Recent media reports have discussed avian influenza and what many in the media have called an "impending" pandemic. While there is legitimate concern, there has also been a great deal of confusion and misinformation. We must be clear, avian influenza is first and foremost an animal disease. The current outbreak in Southeast Asia and parts of Europe is affecting poultry and a limited amount of humans that have been in direct contact with infected animals. The virus has not yet demonstrated the ability to pass directly from human to human and it is not clear at this time if this avian influenza virus will ever mutate to allow for a human pandemic, but the potential does exist. As such, it is very important that we pursue a sincere yet cautious approach in preparing to address potential outbreaks both here and abroad. The most effective way to combat a potential pandemic is to control and eradicate the virus in poultry before it has a chance to negatively impact humans.

It is my hope that this hearing today will help the Members of this Committee and the public to better understand the topic and how it may impact U.S. poultry production. We are privileged to have before us today some of the top experts on avian influenza along with producers and processors with real-world experience. I hope they will help us cut through the noise and understand where we should and where we should not be focusing our concerns.

One especially important point relates to the role of US poultry in any future, potential avian influenza outbreak. As I understand it there is a great difference between the mostly weak strains of avian influenza occasionally found in U.S. birds and the more-potent H5N1 strain that is causing concern in Asia and Europe - a strain that has never been identified in the U.S. In addition, it is my understanding that U.S. public health officials do not see U.S. poultry as a likely source of any significant potential human avian influenza outbreak. Rather, it seems that the travel of humans from affected areas to the U.S, not our domestic poultry, is what we most need to keep our eyes on. I look forward to clarifying that point today.

Secondly, I think it is important that we hear more about the safety and the biosecurity efforts

of the federal government and the US poultry industry. In recent conversations with USDA and industry officials I've been encouraged to learn of all the measures that are taken to isolate US commercial poultry from any diseases carried by wild bird populations. That is an important distinction between US poultry production and the production systems in Asia. I look forward to learning more about that topic as well.

As we move toward the Thanksgiving season we are again mindful of all the ways that this nation has been so blessed. The security and abundance of our food supply should certainly rank highly among those blessings. However, despite all the hard work and science-based measures that make U.S. poultry the safest in the world, we are always striving to do better. I hope that through this exchange today we can reassure consumers regarding the safety of U.S. poultry and identify any additional actions that may be needed to further enhance the safety and wholesomeness of this important component of the U.S. food supply.