OHIO POULTRY ASSOCIATION

Ohio House Agriculture Committee
Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza
Jim Chakeres, Executive Vice President

Chairman Creech, Vice-Chair Newman, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Agriculture Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Ohio's egg, turkey and chicken farmers. My name is Jim Chakeres, and I serve as Executive Vice President of the Ohio Poultry Association.

I am here today to provide industry information on the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza outbreak in west central Ohio. Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, also called HPAI or bird flu has wreaked havoc on Ohio's commercial poultry flocks in west Central Ohio. Ohio has currently lost over 12 million egg laying hens, pullets, turkeys and ducks. Darke and Mercer counties are the locations of the majority of the infected flocks.

The United States is now entering the fourth year of an outbreak of HPAI that has devastated farms, required the depopulation of more than 150 million birds on commercial poultry operations, infected a small but growing number of farm workers, and – tragically – earlier this year led to the first human death in the United States from the disease. Our farmers are in the fight of their lives and doing everything possible to protect their flocks.

The outbreak has been extremely difficult for the farmers, the poultry companies, the local communities, and the greater poultry industry. It is truly devastating to deal with a foreign animal disease outbreak. We are grateful for the support of our partners at the Ohio Department of Agriculture, the United States Department of Agriculture, The Ohio State University, and our federal, state and local elected officials and agencies. Ohio's poultry industry is resilient. We will move past this and reclaim our spot as a top poultry producing state.

I am hopeful we may put this behind us, as our infection rate has slowed the past few days. There is much work to be done, but we see the light at the end of the tunnel. We are all working together and look forward to control areas and quarantine zones being lifted, which will allow our farms to begin restocking young birds. But to make this happen, we need help.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture's Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory needs to be fully funded. This will allow us to move past this outbreak and help to prepare and prevent, and God forbid, respond to a future outbreak.

The industry needs clear and consistent communication from our federal partners as national policies change and new programming is implemented. We need continued federal support and an indemnity program that provides for a reasonable, fair payment to companies and producers that are impacted by this horrible disease.

We need an HPAI vaccine for our birds. The Ohio Poultry Association (OPA) strongly supports the development and deployment of effective HPAI vaccinations for turkeys and egg-laying hens. A comprehensive vaccine protocol is a critical tool to ensure this lethal virus does not continue to negatively impact both human and animal health.

OPA recognizes that HPAI vaccination presents challenges with supply and implementation. We also recognize potential international trade implications and support and encourage the U.S. government to pursue compartmentalization, which would allow egg and turkey farms to vaccinate, while hopefully protecting the broiler trade. Chicken meat and products from unvaccinated birds should be accepted by all international trading partners.

This disease is spread by wild, migratory birds. We need effective measures in controlling wild bird populations. Many Canada Geese have now obtained resident status. How do we control the movement of a protected species? My farms are constantly practicing the best-known biosecurity practices, including truck washes, shower in/out facilities, excluding all but essential farm employees, etc. The disease still enters, perhaps through ventilation. The virus is evading our strongest measures, and this further amplifies the need for migratory bird control.

Ohio's poultry industry needs continued and new research into Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. Researchers from institutions such as The Ohio State University needs to be fully supported. The industry needs new tools and protocols that will result in new and better vaccines, even more advanced biosecurity practices, improved bird health and genetics, and much more.

We need the continued support and outreach of our many partners that help share resources concerning mental health and wellness with the industry and local communities. The emotional toll of bird flu is extraordinary.

We need the patience and understanding of our consumers as we navigate this uncertain situation. We will return to full production. A greater product supply will help ease consumer prices. But this takes time. It may be several months – or even years – before consumers see price changes at the grocery store and restaurants.

Ohio's poultry farmers look forward to engaging with you and providing fresh, wholesome, and nutritious eggs, chicken and turkey to Ohio, the United States, and the world.