



**Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
Testimony on Amended Substitute House Bill 96
Jim Chakeres, Executive Vice President
The Ohio Poultry Association**

Chairman Schaffer, Vice-Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today on behalf of Ohio's egg, turkey and chicken farmers on the vital need for additional funding for two items within the Ohio Department of Agriculture's budget aimed at fighting Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), also known as "bird flu."

My name is Jim Chakeres, and I serve as Executive Vice President of the Ohio Poultry Association. As members of this committee may recall, at the request of Chairman Schaffer, I testified before this very committee a few months ago to provide an update on the HPAI outbreak in west central Ohio that has truly impacted all Ohioans. 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 15.8 million egg laying hens, pullets, turkeys and ducks at 76 premises. Darke and Mercer counties are the locations of the majority of the infected flocks but we have also seen smaller, isolated minor outbreaks in other areas of Ohio.

While I am here to provide this Committee with updated information regarding this critical issue, on behalf of my members, I am also asking this committee and the General Assembly for your help in enabling my members to continue to meet these HPAI challenges head on. Specifically, I am asking for the incorporation of an amendment into Amended Substitute House Bill 96 that would provide \$627,500 in each fiscal year to each of two separate line items within ODA's budget; the LI-700401 line item (Animal Health Programs) and the LI-700415 line item (Poultry Inspection). This amendment was offered by several members in the House and was debated during that chamber's budget process. Unfortunately, it was not included in the final version of HB 96 that is before you today.

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.

The crisis experienced by my members runs deeper than just financial losses. 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 on the farmers and families of the workers is extraordinary.

I am hopeful we may put this behind us, as our infection rate has slowed over the past several weeks. 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. I am also concerned about a Foreign Animal Disease outbreak in more than one species, which will greatly affect lab capacity.

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 are pleased that USDA has recently updated their indemnity payment tables, but we have yet to learn if these new rates will be retroactive to cover Ohio losses. The Ohio Poultry Association (OPA) applauds the recent action outlined by USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins to address Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI).

HPAI 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.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, OPA and our members in your communities ask for your support of additional funding to enable our members to deal with the devastating impact of HPAI.