



alert



AVIAN INFLUENZA RISK OF UPSURGE AND REGIONAL SPREAD THROUGH INCREASED POULTRY TRADE BEFORE AND DURING LUNAR NEW YEAR FESTIVITIES IN ASIA

27 January 2025

Key facts:

1. Avian influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease with zoonotic potential that has severe impacts on animal health, livelihoods, economy and human health.
2. Wild waterfowl are considered the natural reservoir for AI viruses. Wild migratory bird movements are one of the main drivers for the long-distance and intercontinental spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) viruses. Contacts between wild birds and poultry is a major risk factor for HPAI introduction into farms.
3. Unregulated trade in live poultry, shared vehicles or other fomites, and poor management of dead birds are some of the main drivers for HPAI spread between farms.
4. In its highly pathogenic form, AI affects most severely gallinaceous birds (e.g. chickens, turkeys, quails, or guinea fowls), resulting in severe and acute systemic infection and high mortality. Domestic ducks have shown more resilience to HPAI virus infections however, fatal outcomes may be reported even in these species.
5. In late 2021, H5N1 virus clade 2.3.4.4b was introduced in North America by migratory birds. It spread along established flyways, reaching South America by October 2022, the sub-Antarctic by October 2023 and has since continued to circulate in the region.
6. HPAI has caused significant mortalities in wild bird and mammalian populations in recent epidemics, including endangered species under conservation efforts. More than 50 wild bird species and several marine mammal species were affected by HPAI in Latin America in 2023.

FAO calls for increased vigilance and preparedness for avian influenza (AI) during the traditional New Year festivities that will take place across Asia on the week of 27 January 2025.

In the past year, outbreaks of AI have continued to be reported in domestic poultry, wild birds and mammals in Asia. Several AI virus subtypes including H5N1, H5N2, H5N3, H5N5, H5N6, H5N8, H7N3, H7N6, H7N8, H7N9, H10N5, and H3N2 are currently well-established in both wild and domestic bird populations in the region. In addition, subtype H5N1 subclade 2.3.4.4b continues to circulate in both wild and domestic birds worldwide.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) can lead to heavy losses for the poultry industry, in particular to the livelihoods of vulnerable small-scale producers. Poultry trade and related activities play a key role in AI spread and amplification in domestic bird populations, including the trade of infected live poultry and their products, handling or slaughtering infected poultry, and limited biosecurity along the poultry value chain. Before and during New Year festivities, the risk is further exacerbated by high demand for poultry meat and products, triggering increased and intensified poultry trade and movements as well as visits to live poultry markets.

In addition, a [rise in mammalian species infected with HPAI](#) has been recorded globally including outbreaks in farmed mink in Europe, marine mammals in the Americas, cats in the Republic of Korea, and more recently in red foxes and raccoon dogs in Japan, and in [captive wild felids in Viet Nam](#). Notably in 2024, HPAI H5N1 has been found in raw milk of [dairy cows](#) – the animals experienced clinical signs including decreased milk production, thickened colostrum-like milk, reduced food intake, lethargy, fever, loose manure and dehydration.

Importantly, AI virus subtypes have demonstrated their zoonotic potential, i.e. the ability to transmit between birds and humans. During 2024, in the Region of Asia and the Pacific, human cases of influenza A(H5N1) were detected in Australia, Cambodia, and Viet Nam. HPAI A(H5N6) was also reported in China. Other subtypes have also been associated with zoonotic transmission in Asia in the past year, including influenza, A(H3N8), and A(H9N2).

Most of these cases reported exposure through close contact with infected live poultry. While human infections with AI viruses remain sporadic events and do not currently spread easily from person to person, they warrant attention since symptoms observed in humans range from asymptomatic to severe and can be fatal.

INCREASED AVIAN INFLUENZA RISKFAO RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an increased risk of AI spread in Asia due to intensified in-country travel around Lunar New Year (January-February 2025), specifically considering the following:

- millions of people are expected to travel for the New Year (starting late January 2025);
- vast majority of traffic will be within countries of the Asian region, but also to and from Asia;
- poultry trade is increasing to serve the high demand for poultry meat and other products consumed during these festivities;
- travel and trade increase the risk of spreading AI, since the virus can be transmitted via contact with infected animals as well as contaminated clothing, vehicles and other equipment.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

In light of the elevated risk, FAO is calling on all Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) in Asia to increase AI prevention and preparedness activities to reduce the likelihood of poultry outbreaks and subsequent impacts on livelihoods, economies, and human infections.

Specifically, FAO recommends countries to:

- **Enhance controls at national borders and along traffic routes based on risk analyses** to minimize the risk of introduction of potentially infected live poultry and poultry products.
- **Promote improved biosecurity measures along the value chain**, including at farms, live bird markets, slaughter points, etc. to limit further spread of the disease and mitigate the risk of human exposure.
- **Implement measures for early detection, timely reporting and rapid containment** of infection, as delays can lead to rapid spread. In addition, the adoption of policies that encourage disease reporting, such as providing adequate compensation following animal culling, can help mitigate these threats.
- **On infected premises (e.g. farms or live bird markets including associated vehicles), conduct appropriate cleaning and disinfection** and take action on carcasses, slurry and faecal waste to ensure they do not pose a risk for further transmission and spread of virus. Where possible, use the period immediately following the Lunar New Year festivities for short closures of live bird markets for decontamination after all birds have been sold and processed.

Useful Links

AI situation updates

- ▶ [Global avian influenza virus with zoonotic potential situation update](#) – (available through e-mail distribution; if interested please contact: EMPRES-Livestock@fao.org)
- ▶ [Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases \(ECTAD\) Asia and the Pacific Region](#)
- ▶ [FAO RAP Event based surveillance bi-weekly update](#)
- ▶ [FAO EMPRES Watch - A\(H5N1\) influenza in dairy cattle in the United States of America](#)
- ▶ [USDA APHIS – Detections of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza](#)
- ▶ [WHO avian influenza surveillance webpage](#)
[WOAH avian Influenza webpage](#)
- ▶ [OFFLU statement on continued expansion of H5 HPAI in wildlife in South America and incursion into the Antarctic region \(2023\)](#)
- ▶ [FAO Rapid Qualitative Risk Assessment – Risk of H5 HPAI introduction in Central and South America and the Caribbean](#)

Guidelines for AI surveillance and response

- ▶ [Global strategy for the prevention and control of high pathogenicity avian influenza \(2024–2033\)](#) – Achieving sustainable, resilient poultry production systems (2025).
- ▶ CMS FAO Scientific Task Force on Avian Influenza and Wild Birds (2023). [Statement on H5N1 high pathogenicity avian influenza in wild birds – Unprecedented conservation impacts and urgent needs](#).
- ▶ WOA [practical guide for authorised field responders to HPAI outbreaks in marine mammals](#) (2024).
- ▶ [Recommendations for the surveillance of influenza A\(H5N1\) in cattle](#) – With broader application to other farmed mammals (2024).
- ▶ Preparing for highly pathogenic avian influenza (FAO Manual No.3 - 2006) – [English](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#).
- ▶ [Guiding principles for the design of avian influenza active surveillance in Asia](#) – Designing active, comprehensive, risk-based avian influenza surveillance (2022).
- ▶ [FAO risk communication in animal disease outbreaks and emergencies](#)
- ▶ Biosecurity for highly pathogenic avian influenza - issues and options (FAO Paper No.165 - 2008) – [English](#), [French](#).
- ▶ Biosecurity guide for live poultry markets (FAO Manual No.17 - 2015) – [English](#), [French](#).
- ▶ Carcass management guidelines – Effective disposal of animal carcasses and contaminated materials on small to medium-sized farms (FAO Guidelines No. 23 - 2020) – [English](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#).
- ▶ Good Emergency Management Practice: The Essentials (FAO Manual No. 25 - 2021) – [English](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#).

Vaccination guidance in humans and animals

- ▶ [FAO Focus on: Rational use of vaccination for prevention and control of H5 highly pathogenic avian influenza](#)
- ▶ [OFFLU avian influenza poultry vaccine matching \(OFFLU-AIM\) report – October 2024](#)
- ▶ [WHO recommended composition of zoonotic influenza A virus vaccines – September 2024](#)

- **Upon detection of outbreaks, timely alert neighbouring countries as well as international organizations**, including the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). This includes rapid sharing of virus sequences with relevant partners to ensure appropriate actions are taken by countries in the region (e.g. ensuring the use of adapted vaccines in countries that implement vaccination programmes against AI). The [OFFLU Avian Influenza Vaccine Matching \(AIM\) for poultry vaccines](#) is available for guidance.
- **Implement surveillance schemes that support the detection of HPAI viruses in both domestic and wild birds.** Provide mechanisms for reporting sick or dead birds (hotlines, collection points) and raise awareness about the importance of reporting. Farmers, hunters, or rangers should be encouraged to report to veterinary authorities once they see unusual clinical signs in birds including: sudden increase in mortalities; swelling of the head, eyelids, comb, wattles, and hocks; purple discoloration of the wattles, comb, and legs; gasping for air (difficulty breathing); coughing, sneezing, and/or nasal discharge (runny nose); stumbling or falling; or ruffled feathers or neurological disease in water birds.
- **Expand surveillance to relevant mammals**, for better early detection of HPAI viruses, and to understand their role in the epidemiology, spread and transmission of avian influenza, including in dairy cattle. [FAO Recommendations for the surveillance of influenza A\(H5N1\) in cattle](#) and [A list of mammalian species affected by H5Nx](#) are available for guidance.
- **Ensure laboratories have adequate capacities to diagnose circulating H5Nx HPAI viruses and deploy point-of-need rapid tests as appropriate.**
- **Implement targeted sampling of animals with a higher likelihood of detecting the virus.** Targeting sick or freshly dead birds as well as sampling their environment will increase the probability of detecting AI viruses.
- **Shift to active surveillance, differential diagnosis, and increased virological screening.** Active surveillance in key hotspots of the poultry value chain such as live bird markets allows for early detection of AI virus incursion/amplification.
- **Collaborate closely with forestry/environment sector and wetland, or bird reserve management authorities** in contact with wild bird populations to foster information-sharing and joint AI surveillance and prevention activities well ahead of the potential introduction or spread of the virus.
- **Facilitate early reporting and response by consulting closely with the private sector** (i.e. producers, traders and related businesses). Preparing and sharing communication materials prior to AI virus introduction will help minimize misunderstandings and rumours.
- **Reinforce awareness campaigns.** High level of awareness should be maintained among poultry keepers, the general population, traders, market workers, hunters, and any other relevant stakeholder about AI, precautionary and personal protection measures as well as reporting and collection mechanisms for sick or dead birds.

Contacts

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- **Action against wild birds, particularly indiscriminate hunting or disturbances of habitat, should not be undertaken.**
[Guidance is available to respond to HPAI in wild birds.](#)

WHAT FAO IS DOING

- Tracking disease rumours in Asia and the Pacific and sharing relevant information with stakeholders in the region on a bi-weekly basis. Please see [FAO ECTAD event-based surveillance in Asia and the Pacific bi-weekly update](#) for more information.
- Conducting consultations with AI experts in Asia and the Pacific to identify innovative approaches to respond to emerging AI threats. Published consultation reports are available at this [link](#).
- Conducting [public health assessments](#) jointly with Tripartite partners (FAO/WHO/WOAH) of recent influenza A(H5) virus events in animals and people.
- Monitoring and assessing the evolving disease situation. To share updates on your country's situation, please contact FAO at FAO-GLEWS@fao.org.
- Liaising with FAO/WOAH Reference Laboratories and partner organizations to assess virus characteristics and provide laboratory protocols for detection.
- Raising awareness about important epidemiological and virological findings and their implications.
- Providing recommendations for affected countries and those at risk addressing preparedness, prevention and disease control.
- Providing support for risk assessment and mapping to identify hot spots for risk mitigation and the implementation of risk-based surveillance.
- Offering support in the provision of diagnostic reagents and personal protective equipment, provided certain conditions are met (contact: EMPRES-Lab-Unit@fao.org).
- Offering assistance to national authorities for shipment of samples as well as virus sub-typing and sequencing, provided certain conditions are met (contact: EMPRES-Shipping-Service@fao.org).

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