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Pest/Disease Occurrences

Avian Influenza Outbreaks in Moscow Oblast 2007

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Report Highlights:

Outbreaks of avian influenza have been registered in backyard poultry flocks in Moscow oblast. The pathogen in the first series of outbreaks has been identified as a highly pathogenic strain of the A/H5N1 virus and is believed to have originated in Southeast Asia. Russian authorities are responding actively to contain the outbreaks. No human cases of avian influenza have been reported, and no commercial flocks have been affected. The point of origin in Russia is believed to be the Moscow city pet market, where owners of the affected flocks bought chickens in the days leading up to the outbreaks.

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Summary

Outbreaks of avian influenza have been registered in backyard poultry flocks in eight villages of Moscow *oblast*. The pathogen in the first series of outbreaks has been identified as a highly pathogenic strain of the A/H5N1 virus and is believed to have originated in Southeast Asia. Russian authorities are responding actively to contain the outbreaks, culling affected flocks, vaccinating poultry across the *oblast*, and placing owners of affected poultry under medical observation. The point of origin in Russia is believed to be the Moscow city pet market, where owners of the affected flocks bought chickens in the days leading up to the outbreaks.

To date over 200 head of backyard poultry have died or been destroyed due to the outbreaks. No human cases of avian influenza have been reported, and no commercial flocks have been affected.

Scope and Chronology

On February 9, a resident of the village of Shikhovo, on the outskirts of Zvenigorod city in Odintsovskiy *rayon* of Moscow *oblast*, bought a single chicken at the Moscow city pet market. Two days later, February 11, birds in his backyard poultry flock began dying. The buyer of the chicken returned to the market with the carcass of the by-now dead chicken to demand his money back. The seller turned the carcass over to veterinary authorities for examination.

Also on February 11, a resident of the village of Pavlovskoye, in Domodedovskiy *rayon* of Moscow *oblast*, bought five chickens and two turkeys at the same pet market. Two days later, February 13, birds in his backyard flock also began to die. He also turned over the carcasses to veterinary authorities for examination.

On February 16, Russian veterinary and health authorities made public the initial laboratory results of these tests. The pathogen was identified as avian influenza, but the serotype and pathogenicity were not yet known. The three avian pavilions at the Moscow pet market were closed for business, swabbed to collect samples for testing of the presence of the virus, and then disinfected. Subsequent testing failed to reveal any presence of an avian influenza pathogen at the market, however.

The affected villages were placed under quarantine, and the affected backyard flocks were culled. Since during winter backyard flocks are not allowed to wander the villages, there was no evidence of infection of neighbors' flocks, and thus culling was limited only to those showing signs of infection. Mass vaccination of backyard poultry in the *oblast* was begun, starting with the affected villages.

Moscow *oblast* authorities quickly opened a telephone hot line and encouraged citizens to report in if they had bought birds at the Moscow pet market since February 1, if they observed suspected symptoms of avian influenza in their poultry, and to seek advice on how to prevent spread of the disease. Announcements of the availability of the hotline were broadcast widely on radio and television, and published in print media.

Over the weekend of February 17 and 18, three additional outbreaks were reported in the villages of Babenki (Podolskiy *rayon*), Marushkino (Naro-Fominskiy *rayon*) and Maklakovo (Taldomskiy *rayon*) of Moscow *oblast*. Two more outbreaks were reported in the villages of Yershovskoye, Odintsovskiy *rayon*, and Solodovo, Volokolamskiy *rayon*, late February 19. These outbreaks were also traced back to poultry acquired at the Moscow pet market.

Over the weekend health officials checked the health of 1200 residents of the affected villages, and placed 18 owners of dead birds under close medical observation. Two individuals were hospitalized for respiratory distress, but no evidence of infection with avian influenza was revealed, and in general the incidence of common influenza remained below the epidemic threshold. By Monday the number of residents checked for symptoms had risen to 5,453, and a total of 20 owners of dead birds were under medical observation.

At the same time, owners of commercial poultry flocks in Moscow *oblast*, already operating under strict biosafety rules, went on high alert. Most if not all reviewed existing biosafety protocols and tightened procedures, including restricting access to facilities, disinfection of arriving and departing vehicles, and use of protective clothing by workers.

February 18 the Federal Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance Service (VPSS) reported the pathogen had been identified as an A/H5N1 serotype. On February 19 VPSS reported that additional gene sequencing work had narrowed the virus down to a highly pathogenic Asian-origin strain. Officials speculated that the virus was introduced to Moscow via Central Asia, the Caucasus region, or possibly the Balkans, but conceded that the precise avenue remains to be determined. Additional gene sequencing is underway on samples from the February 17 and 18 outbreaks, with results expected by no later than February 26.

On February 20 one additional outbreak was reported in Moscow *oblast*. A resident of the Moscow suburb of Ramenskoye in Ramenskiy *rayon* reported the death of 75 head of backyard poultry after he brought home birds purchased from an undisclosed location.

As of February 20 over 190 birds had been reported dead or destroyed, not counting the 75 in Ramenskoye, all in backyard flocks. The official response to the outbreaks to that date involved 37 vehicles and 150 public health, public safety, and veterinary personnel. The Moscow *oblast* procuracy announced it had opened a felony investigation to determine whether criminal negligence had led to infection of the backyard poultry flocks. The owner of the index case bird at the Moscow pet market has not been identified, nor has the origin of that index case been determined yet.

Consumer Reaction

Unfortunately, consumer reaction has been decidedly negative despite the obvious lack of any imminent threat to public health and official reminders that poultry meat and eggs, when properly cooked, are safe to eat. Television reports have shown shoppers refusing to buy poultry meat from local producers, and producers report lagging demand from the outlets to which they normally wholesale their products. Television commentators have not been above fueling panic, and constant media coverage of veterinarians in Tyvek coveralls and respirators has heightened consumer anxiety.

The last serious outbreak of avian influenza near Moscow, the Autumn 2005 outbreak in Tula *oblast*, led to a temporary drop in poultry meat sales in Moscow of between 10 and 20 percent, depending on producer. This winter's series of outbreaks, each of which is located less than a two-hour drive from Moscow's city limits, may have a more serious psychological effect on the population and thus dampen demand even more. However, a public opinion poll conducted by *Komsomolskaya pravda* newspaper revealed that only 19% of those surveyed intend to stop eating poultry meat because of the avian influenza outbreaks. Of the rest, 38 percent consider the threat exaggerated, 23 percent plan to give up meat for the duration of Orthodox Christian Lent anyway, and 20 percent will continue to eat chicken if they have cooked it themselves.