

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson

“Stopping an Avian Influenza Threat to Animal and Public Health”

July 8, 2015

As submitted for the record:

Good morning. I want to welcome and thank our witnesses for being with us today.

As I often say in our hearings, our committee has a mission statement, and that is to enhance the economic and national security of our country. Avian influenza poses a major threat to both our economy because of its potential impact on the poultry industry and, in the long-term, to public health. We will be looking at these issues today.

I want to be clear that this is not a hearing to scare anyone away from buying eggs or turkeys over fears of infection. Our food supply is safe and adequately protected. But it is important for us to examine this threat and the response to the outbreak in detail.

The outbreak of the H5N2 strain this year ravaged egg-laying and turkey facilities through the Midwest. More than 40 million chickens have been lost on account of this virus. That’s over 10 percent of the entire egg-laying population. In the turkey industry, 7.8 million birds, over 3 percent of the industry, have been euthanized to stop the spread the outbreaks.

According to Goldman Sachs, this outbreak could cost consumers \$8 billion in higher egg prices, or 75 percent more than last year. That’s an extra \$20 on average for every American. It is fortunate that the outbreak has stopped as temperatures across the Midwest have increased. But many states are extremely nervous about a renewed outbreak in the fall as migratory birds begin moving again, potentially bringing the virus back to the Midwest or even taking it down the Atlantic coast, where hundreds of millions of chickens are raised annually.

We have the opportunity now to examine the issues vital to responding to another outbreak, including how testing and depopulating of animals can be improved, the need for a vaccine that industry can use, and how agencies and states are planning for another big hit.

Our food supply would undoubtedly remain safe, but the loss of millions more chickens and turkeys would be devastating. The hit to our nation’s economy would be in the billions of dollars. On the public health front, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stated that the public health risk from the recent outbreaks has been minimal. That being said, there have been more than 100 of cases of human avian influenza infections worldwide just this year, according to the World Health Organization.

The reality is that at some point, we will face another pandemic resulting from a strain of avian influenza. We need to stay vigilant and ready to mitigate any potential threat to our homeland.

I look forward to hearing your testimony about what the threat of avian influenza has meant to animal and public health, including your experience with the recent outbreaks.

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