

Avian Influenza outbreak confirmed on Ekurhuleni farm

The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development has confirmed the outbreak of the avian influenza on a commercial farm in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng.



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In a statement, the department said about 300 birds had died from the virus on the commercial chicken-layer farm.

"The samples from this farm that were sent to the laboratory tested positive for the H5 strain of avian influenza. It must be said that this farm was also part of the H5N8 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) outbreak in 2017," reads the statement.

Upon confirmation that it was H5, the birds in the affected house were immediately destroyed.

The DALRRD said arrangements were made for samples to be urgently tested at Onderstepoort Veterinary Research, to determine the pathotype - whether it is high (HPAI) or low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) - as well as to determine the N-type of the virus.

The results were still pending.

The Gauteng veterinary authorities have placed the farm under quarantine, while further investigating the outbreak.

Ministry spokesperson Reggie Ngcobo in the statement said authorities were also performing back and forward tracing to determine the extent of the outbreak and assist with safe disposal of dead chickens and disinfection of the farm.

"Poultry farmers have to be on the lookout for signs of disease that may indicate avian influenza and report any suspicion to the nearest state veterinarian for immediate investigation," he said.

Signs common with the birds infected with HPAI includes quietness and extreme depression. Signs also include a sudden drop in the production of eggs, many of which are soft-shelled or shell-less.

The department said wattle and combs become red and swollen. There is also swelling of the skin under the bird's eyes and experience coughing, sneezing and nervousness signs and diarrhoea.

Affected birds also have haemorrhages (blood spots) on the hock.

The department also warned that a few deaths may occur over several days, followed by the rapid spread of disease and deaths up to 100% within 48 hours.

In the statement, the department called on all poultry farmers, as well as those with birds kept for a hobby or zoo purposes, to implement several biosecurity measures.

These include:

- Keeping the birds away from areas that are visited by wild birds;
- Control access of people and equipment to poultry houses;
- Avoid provision of water and food in a way that may attract wild birds; Rather feed free-range birds undercover or inside a confined structure;
- Maintain proper disinfection of the property, poultry houses and equipment;
- Avoid the introduction of birds of unknown disease status into your flock(s);
- Report illnesses and deaths of birds to your responsible State or Private Veterinarian; and
- Implement procedures for safe disposal of manure and dead birds.

The department said it was also notified of large wild bird die-offs in Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape.

"Samples from chickens that were collected at the end of March 2021 in two villages in Stutterheim tested negative (disease not present) for Newcastle disease and avian influenza. Follow-up investigations are ongoing," reads the statement.