

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

June 26, 2015

Mr. Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) is an extremely infectious and fatal disease in poultry and water fowl. Two sub-types (H5N2 and H5N8) have been found by the USDA in the United States and are spreading, causing widespread economic devastation and the deaths of tens of millions of birds.¹

The U.S. is the world's largest poultry producer, with the total farm value of U.S. poultry production exceeding \$20 billion, approximately 18 percent of which is exported. Since the HPAI outbreak, 29 countries plus the European Union have enacted trade restrictions impacting U.S. poultry.

While the current sub-types of avian influenza do not appear to infect humans, there is concern they could infect swine. GAO has previously reported that swine are particularly worrisome because they can become infected with not only swine influenza viruses but also human and avian influenza viruses. The World Health Organization cautions that pigs could play a role in the potential emergence of a pandemic virus. Iowa—the largest egg and hog producing state—has the most avian influenza infections of any U.S. state. Commercial poultry and swine operations are often located in close proximity of one another, exacerbating the threat of infection. HPAI also has the potential to threaten public health indirectly through pressures on the flu vaccine development process, which still mostly requires chicken eggs.

Eight years ago, GAO reported numerous challenges with federal preparedness for this disease that could slow response including incomplete planning at the federal and state level, depopulation, disposal, and diagnostic surge capacity. GAO made several recommendations to help USDA better prepare for HPAI outbreaks². Disease surveillance is also critical for early detection, monitoring the spread of the disease, and aiding in recovery to prove the absence of

¹ Daniel Enoch, "Biosecurity lapses among factors in spread of bird flu, USDA finds," Agri-Pulse, June 15, 2015.

² GAO-07-652

the disease. In 2013, GAO found that while USDA was developing a new approach to disease surveillance, it faced challenges gathering data from industry and state animal health authorities, among other entities, and did not have an overall strategy to deal with these challenges.³ We recognize that USDA has surveillance efforts underway and is working to control the current outbreak. However, this virus is proving incredibly infectious, affecting more than 220 farms in over a dozen states and requiring the destruction of almost 50 million birds in agriculture production across the country, according to USDA.⁴ Despite USDA's actions, the efforts of scientists, and the precautions taken by farmers to protect their commercial flocks, this virus continues to spread.

We are concerned about federal preparedness efforts in response to this rapidly spreading disease and request that GAO address the following questions:

1. Which aspects of USDA's HPAI response plan are working well and what areas, if any, need further improvement?
2. How is USDA ensuring that industry's biosecurity measures are sufficient to protect the nation's poultry supply?
3. To what extent do the sub-types in the current outbreak have the potential to mutate and affect other species, including swine and humans?
 - a. What efforts are underway to surveil HPAI in swine?
 - b. To what extent is USDA gathering information from industry on swine influenza surveillance?
 - c. To what extent is USDA coordinating with HHS with regard to human impact from HPAI?
4. What implications, if any, are there for the U.S. vaccine supply for animal and human flu vaccines?
 - a. How are the facilities producing eggs for vaccines protected from HPAI and are these facilities included in USDA's disease surveillance approach?

If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Alan Slobodin of the majority committee staff at (202) 225-2927 or Una Lee with the minority staff at (202) 225-3641.

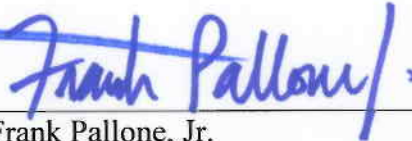
³ GAO-13-424

⁴ Christopher Doering, "USDA says hundreds working on bird flu," Des Moines Register, June 15, 2015.

Sincerely,



Fred Upton
Chairman



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Ranking Member



Tim Murphy
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations



Diana DeGette
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations