



Subject: Urgent Action Needed to Address HPAI Outbreak in Dairy Cows

April 15, 2024

Secretary Tom Vilsack, United States Department of Agriculture

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

As a united coalition, we urgently seek the USDA's assistance in improving streamlined, accurate and timely, ongoing communication during the current outbreak of HPAI in dairy cows across the United States. Given your extensive background as the former Governor of Iowa, CEO of U.S. DEC, and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, you understand the benefits of collaboration and transparent communication between industry, state, and federal partners to protect animal health and our nation's food supply. During the APHIS call with industry on April 12, the USDA Communications spokesperson said they would reach out to industry when they have additional information. Due to the many challenges with this emerging disease, one way communication will not be effective in uniting regulatory and industry partners to mitigate and control the outbreak as gaps in communication leave space for speculation and rumors quickly adopted by social media. Please encourage open communication, solicit feedback in the creation of guidance, allow access to data and results and continue to allow this coalition unfettered access to our APHIS and VS Field Staff.

Our Concerns:

1. **Economic Impact:** The outbreak is causing financial losses for dairy producers and states. Blanket stop movement orders, which have been discussed, will amplify the economic impacts exponentially with disastrous consequences to the industry and animal health and welfare. Inconsistent stop movement orders for individual states create confusion and create uncertainty for interstate and international commerce, disrupting continuity of business.
2. **Maintaining Public Trust:** The presence of this virus in milk has raised important questions that must be answered to maintain public trust in the safety and abundance of our food supply. Some concerns include raw milk consumption and persistent shedding of the virus in healthy, asymptomatic cows.
3. **Divergent responses and communication from states, industry, state animal health officials, private veterinarians, commodities, commissions and other key stakeholders.**

Specific Requests:

1. **Direct, Unrestricted Communication to USDA:** Grant USDA technical experts and leadership direct, unrestricted access to state agency officials, industry stakeholders, and veterinarians. Frequent and open communication is essential to uncovering new information to aid in a rapid, coordinated response that balances risk and business continuity.
2. **USDA's National Leadership for Response:** Reinstate best practices for responding to emerging infectious and foreign animal diseases in accordance with the USDA's "Emerging Animal Disease

Preparedness and Response Plan” created in 2017 that gives USDA centralized communication responsibilities. The USDA is the only agency with national access to the epidemiological data of affected herds, oversight of the virus genome sequencing, the ability to provide financial support for diagnostic testing, and communicating with international partners. Coordinated leadership from the USDA is vital to a rapid response to protect animal health and the food supply.

3. **Collaboration across Agencies:** Ensure transparent communication with partner federal agencies (CDC and FDA), state wildlife agencies, industry leaders and subject matter experts. Each plays a critical role in the management of this disease and protection of public health.
4. **Fund Scientific Study:** Allocate financial and human resources for further scientific study of this H5N1 threat in a new mammalian species. The continued safety of our nation’s food supply and continuity of business for dairy producers depend on filling knowledge gaps. The international community is accustomed to USDA’s leadership in using the best available science to protect food, agriculture, natural resources, rural communities, and nutrition. Proactive surveillance tactics in healthy herds as well as other species (sheep, goats, pigs, horses) will help us be better prepared to understand the current risk of infection and transmission. Data drives science based decision making.

We appreciate you, as Secretary of Agriculture, fostering communication and unrestricted access to APHIS to ensure timely and open access to data and bilateral communication. Your leadership is critical in combating this national outbreak. We invite your feedback and questions at any time.

Respectfully submitted,

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President, National Assembly of State Animal Health Officials

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