

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) Update

Implications of HPAI in Dairy Cattle for People and Wildlife

On April 9, 2024, [HPAI](#) was detected for the first time in dairy cattle in North Carolina, following detections in dairy cattle herds in Texas, New Mexico, Kansas, Michigan, Idaho, Ohio, and South Dakota in the weeks since the first cattle detection on March 25, 2024. The Texas dairy cattle infections are also tied to a case of HPAI in a man who had contact with the infected cattle, although it is unknown if the transmission occurred from an infected cow or bird. [HPAI cases in North Carolina wildlife](#) peaked during the initial 2022 outbreak with 196 lab confirmed cases in wild birds, followed by 23 cases in 2023, and 24 cases in 2024 as of April 22. In North Carolina, HPAI has mainly affected waterfowl, raptors such as bald eagles and black vultures, and other waterbirds including gulls, double-crested cormorants, and brown pelicans. North Carolina has confirmed one case of a wild mammal infection associated with HPAI, which occurred in a black bear in Hyde County. Additionally, Virginia has recently experienced an increase in the number of HPAI cases in waterfowl species in multiple counties along the eastern part of the state.

Below are some frequently asked questions about these new HPAI cases and the status of HPAI in North Carolina.

Is this a different strain from the one we first learned about in 2022?

The strain currently found in N.C. wildlife and the dairy cattle on April 9 is the same strain, H5N1 2.3.4.4b, that has been circulating in wild birds and commercial poultry flocks across the country since 2022, though the virus was first detected in non-poultry livestock, including a goat, in 2024.

How did the cattle contract HPAI?

Wild migratory birds are believed to be the source of infections found in dairy cattle and other wild mammals. Read the [N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' press release](#) on the situation.

Has the risk of human infection changed?

At this time the CDC indicates that the current risk to the public remains low. Most confirmed cases in humans have involved individuals coming into close contact with sick or dead infected poultry without using appropriate protective equipment (e.g., gloves). There is currently no evidence that this strain of HPAI can be transmitted from one person to another. Read the [CDC's recommendations for preventing HPAI spread to people](#).

Why are we seeing a spike in cases now?

Many waterfowl species infected with HPAI may not show any symptoms of illness, allowing them to frequently come into contact with healthy birds and other animals while shedding the virus. Additionally, migratory birds pass through North Carolina in the spring and fall as they travel to and from their breeding and wintering areas, and North Carolina's coastal wetlands, in particular, are major congregation areas for both waterfowl and migratory birds. For these reasons, HPAI cases tend to increase during spring and fall months.

What should I do if I find dead wildlife?

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission is currently tracking HPAI cases in wildlife across the state. If you find dead wild animals, especially 5 or more dead birds within a week, you can report it by contacting the N.C. Wildlife Helpline at 1-866-318-2401 (Monday-Friday, 8 am – 5 pm) or anytime via email at HWI@ncwildlife.org. Recommendations concerning the dead birds may include leaving the animals in place or sanitary disposal. To safely dispose of a dead animal, prevent direct exposure by using disposable gloves or a plastic bag to cover your hands, and place the carcass into a garbage bag. Place this bag into a second garbage bag and dispose of it in the trash. You may also elect to wear a face mask and eye protection if additional protection seems warranted.

Will wild turkeys or the turkey hunting season be affected?

There have been no wild turkeys in N.C. confirmed to have HPAI to date, although wild turkey detections have occurred in other states. The 2024 N.C. wild turkey hunting season will take place as planned from April 13-May 11, 2024. Hunters are advised to not harvest or handle game birds that are obviously sick, wear rubber gloves when handling and dressing game birds, dress game birds and bury inedible parts where they were harvested, wash hands and tools thoroughly with soap and water or disinfectant wipes, and cook game meat thoroughly.

I am a wildlife rehabilitator or backyard poultry flock owner. What extra precautions should I take?

Wildlife rehabilitators and backyard flock owners should always try to prevent exposure of their animals to free-ranging wild birds, including their feces. This may include maintaining animals in enclosures that prevent access by wild birds via bird-proof fencing. While songbirds don't appear to be at significant risk from the current HPAI outbreak, other contagious diseases such as [avian conjunctivitis](#) and [salmonellosis](#) can still spread where these birds congregate. Bird feeders and baths should be thoroughly cleaned on a regular basis and should not be placed where they would encourage wild birds to co-mingle with backyard poultry or rehabilitation animals.

Individuals who work with rehabilitation animals or livestock should avoid unprotected direct physical contact or close exposure with sick or dead birds or other animals, feces, milk, or litter from sick birds or other animals potentially infected or confirmed to be infected with HPAI. When contact is necessary, use proper personal protective equipment (PPE), including a mask and eye protection, and thoroughly wash your hands and disinfect any clothes and gear before having contact with other animals. When transporting an animal suspected of having HPAI, place the animal in an appropriately sized carrier and, if possible, secure the carrier in an area with open ventilation such as the bed of a truck, or the back seat of a car with windows open. If you frequently work with birds, consider having a dedicated set of clothing and shoes for use only in the areas where the birds are kept.

Reports of sick/injured wildlife can be made to the Commission's Wildlife Helpline, Monday-Friday, 8AM-5PM at 1-866-318-2401 or anytime via email at HWI@ncwildlife.org.

Additional Resources

- [Information on HPAI in Dairy Herds in the U.S.](#) - US Department of Agriculture

- [Avian Influenza in North Carolina](#) - NC Department of Agriculture & Customer Service
- [HPAI Recommendations for Prevention, Monitoring, and Public Health](#) – Centers for Disease Control