

Preparing for Avian Flu and Other Emergency Situations

The threat of avian flu – what is it? Some will argue that the threat of bird flu is overstated. Yet, the threat is real. In 2002-2003, Exotic Newcastle Disease swept through California and other western states. Exotic Newcastle Disease is an avian disease that transfers in much the same way as bird flu. However, it does not transfer to humans. The fact that this outbreak was not common knowledge is a testament to the fact that public authorities can work together to identify and eliminate animal diseases. The experience offers authorities a chance to learn how to control the movement of an avian disease without a high risk to human lives.

The risk of bird flu requires the U.S. government to prepare a response. The government can follow the same failed path as Katrina, or it can learn lessons from the response to Exotic Newcastle Disease. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that good intentions are no substitute for a prepared response.

Advanced planning for disasters. During the Exotic Newcastle Disease outbreak, a taskforce made up of state, federal and local actors combined to track, limit and eliminate the disease. State and federal officials had planned ahead for a wide variety of animal diseases which came to prove the importance of pre-planning and prior relationships in a crisis. This advance planning did not provide a detailed blueprint for dealing with any particular disease, but did allow the people involved to get to know each other and identify who would be called on if an emergency did come to pass.

Trained responders. A group of competent and trained responders is required to identify where the disease has spread or is likely to move, place a quarantine on that area, and test or euthanize all birds in that area. The Exotic Newcastle Disease taskforce ultimately employed over seven thousand employees, many of whom were drawn from temporary agencies. The taskforce gradually developed standard operating procedures for every component of the job to ensure a consistent and competent response.

Command system built on trust. A crisis requires a unified command system, but one built on mutual trust. A unified command means having a working organization that clearly identifies who is responsible for what tasks, and who is ultimately in charge. As responders from different organizations come together, they will have to receive orders from unfamiliar officials. The giving and taking of orders depends on a basic level of confidence in those in charge. With Exotic Newcastle Disease, federal and state officials and veterinarians had long-term relationships and were comfortable sharing authority.

Early warning system. Improved surveillance systems can provide early warnings. Exotic Newcastle Disease was discovered when a neighborhood veterinarian recognized the symptoms and contacted state officials.

Unexpected complications. Responders facing bird flu should expect to deal with the unexpected. One unanticipated complication of avian diseases was the importance of non-commercial birds. The Exotic Newcastle Disease taskforce was prepared to de-populate large poultry farms. However, the disease moved via backyard birds, particularly the state's large game fowl population – estimated at over 1 million - that feeds an active (and illegal) cockfighting industry. Tracking the disease among such birds was exponentially more complex.

Recommendations. Planning ahead builds relationships that will be needed when an emergency occurs.

- Government officials will need to determine the composition of the group of responders, as well as how bio-security training procedures will be established.
- As states think about how to respond to avian influenza, close cooperation with the locally-placed Department of Agriculture officials and local responders will be critical to develop the trust needed in an emergency.
- The U.S. government should require clinicians to automatically and electronically send adverse events to regional and state public health authorities.
- The group of responders will need to be large enough and adaptable enough to face unforeseen complications like dealing with the backyard population of birds. ■

Resources

[Donald P. Moynihan, "From Forest Fires to Hurricane Katrina: Case Studies of Incident Command Systems" \(IBM Center for The Business of Government\) 2006.](#)

[Donald P. Moynihan, " Leveraging Collaborative Networks in Infrequent Emergency Situations" \(IBM Center for The Business of Government\) 2005.](#)



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