

Growing danger of the next pandemic

Biden administration places profits over lives, fueling the spread of H5N1 bird flu

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17 December 2024

The H5N1 avian influenza (bird flu) virus is spreading to new locations across the United States, as the dairy industry continues to stifle public health measures that might impinge on its profits. Last week, reports emerged that the virus appeared in wastewater for the first time in Arizona and Hawaii, a highly significant development because unlike past locations with positive wastewater, these two locations do not have outbreaks in dairy cattle or poultry farms.

Although scientists are still trying to determine how the virus gets into wastewater, one leading hypothesis is that the source is rainwater runoff from infected dairy and poultry farms. The absence of such farms nearby their detection in Arizona and Hawaii raises two concerning possibilities.

The first is the possibility of human-to-human transmission, although there is no other clear evidence of this yet. The second is that the virus is frequently exchanged between farms and wild bird populations, meaning that the effects of outbreaks on farms travel far beyond their immediate vicinity.

One hypothesis for the appearance of the virus in wastewater in Flagstaff, Arizona, is that infected backyard chickens are the source. On Hawaii's Island, the virus was detected in the municipal wastewater system of the city of Hilo. The closest known outbreak was on the island of Oahu in a backyard flock of rescued ducks, as well as in a randomly tested wild duck.

In the meantime, the virus continues to run rampant in dairy cattle across California. According to the latest US Department of Agriculture statistics, in the past 30 days 339 dairy farms were newly infected, nearly all of them in California.

Biden administration's systematic cover-up of the spread of bird flu

The Biden administration's response to the spread of bird flu among dairy cattle across the US over the past year amounts to nothing short of criminal negligence.

A recent investigative piece published in *Vanity Fair* describes the intense campaign, spearheaded by Tom Vilsack, the head of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to suppress efforts by local and state public health workers to detect and eliminate bird flu from cattle herds. Based on interviews with over 55 individuals—including veterinarians, the USDA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and figures in the dairy industry—it presents a comprehensive and chilling account of how the response to this outbreak has continuously placed private profit over the health of the American and world population.

According to the article, once the H5N1 virus appeared in cattle in Texas in April, it could have been immediately stopped by preventing movement of cattle among farms, especially to farms in other states. But rather than implement such an order, officials in Texas blithely dismissed the danger of the virus, despite the fact that it has a 15 percent fatality rate among cattle.

The main culprit was Texas Agriculture commissioner Sid Miller. At the time, he was on the short list for Trump's pick to lead the USDA. Clearly auditioning for the position, he protected the industry's interests, which as the piece points out, is the primary function of the USDA. Its role in protecting the food supply typically takes a back seat when profits are at stake, as clearly demonstrated by the history of the response to H5N1.

The campaign of suppression began almost immediately, with the USDA overruling the White House's Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy (OPPR). The USDA degraded rather than improved transparency and communication, canceling biweekly calls held between its veterinary service and state veterinarians.

At least five veterinarians who have spoken out, or simply reacted to the H5N1 threat in a principled manner, have lost their jobs. One veterinarian working in the private sector was told she was a "risk to the company's shareholders." Another veterinarian was fired simply for speaking out on behalf of farmworkers. A third veterinarian was fired for her refusal to fraudulently certify a sick herd as healthy.

Vilsack, the man overseeing the response to this outbreak as head of the USDA, is intimately connected to the meat and dairy industries and has directly profited from these connections throughout his political career. After serving as the governor of Iowa, a major agricultural state, from 1999-2007, he then headed the USDA under Obama, before becoming president and CEO of the US Dairy Export Council during Trump's first term. It is expected that he will return to this position after Trump again takes office.

Illustrating the level of control private industry has over the USDA, when the OPPR developed and began implementing plans to control H5N1 informed by public health best practices, dairy farming corporations immediately called the USDA to demand it stop. They wanted all communications and interactions to occur through the USDA, which they control.

The White House immediately relegated OPPR to a back seat in the H5N1 response. The impacts are clear, as the anemic measures implemented thus far have enabled the virus to continue to spread across the nation and in Canada. The only regulation issued by the USDA was to require testing of lactating cattle prior to transporting them across state lines. The rampant spread to and among dairy cattle in California clearly demonstrates the impotence of the measure.

The USDA has also been slow walking its releases of data. Typically,

sequences of pathogenic viruses worldwide are shared rapidly, within days, with a service known as GISAID. The CDC shares sequences and associated data within 8 days. Other nations such as Cambodia and Vietnam share them even faster.

But the USDA typically takes far longer, often up to 6 weeks. By contrast, China shared the first sequence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus within at most 7 days. Critics have lambasted the USDA over the lack of transparency and inexcusable delays in sharing data.

Dr. Rick Bright, an immunologist, vaccine researcher and director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority from 2016 to 2020, recently said:

It's so critical that the US government is being as transparent as they can right now, overly transparent, and sharing all of these sequences and all of this data so the world can look at it and make their own risk assessments and start making their own vaccine if they need to in their own countries instead of waiting for the United States to say what's good and what's bad...

Already by April (the H5N1 outbreak in cattle was belatedly announced on March 25), three national veterinary organizations had written a letter to Secretary Vilsack demanding increased transparency and data sharing, saying:

One way communication will not be effective in uniting regulatory and industry partners to mitigate and control the outbreak. 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 Field Staff.

Vilsack followed the USDA playbook and moved at a snail's pace even to respond to the letter. It took a month for his reply to arrive, a virtual eternity when it comes to controlling the rapid spread of novel pathogenic viruses. In his reply, he made no promises, merely saying that he was "absolutely committed to timely, accurate, ongoing and coordinated communications about this situation."

Even state departments of agriculture, no enemy of the dairy industry, expressed concern with the USDA response. The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture sent Vilsack a letter in June demanding that the outbreak be treated primarily as an issue of animal health and that the USDA increase data collection and sharing on the outbreak.

Vilsack was quoted as saying on a call with state veterinarians that he was unconcerned by the outbreak and that "It's just going to burn itself out." This statement shows complete ignorance about how novel infectious diseases work and a complete lack of concern for the welfare of both animals and humans.

Growing dangers of a bird flu pandemic under Trump

Needless to say, humanity would be devastated by a new pandemic sparked by the ongoing H5N1 panzootic. Historically, bird flu has had a roughly 50 percent fatality rate among humans since it was first detected in 1997.

The dairy industry and its servant, the USDA, are putting the entire

world at risk in order to protect profits. The industry exports over \$24 billion of produce every year, which is worth more to them than the tens or even hundreds of millions of lives that could be lost in an H5N1 pandemic.

Of course, the incoming Trump administration offers no hope for improving the situation. The best thing one could say about Trump's nominee, Brook Rollins, for USDA is that she does not have extensive ties to the dairy industry. Typical of nearly all of Trump's nominees, however, she was chosen for her loyalty to Trump and not her expertise.

The sum total of Rollins' agriculture expertise is growing up on a farm, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture development from Texas A&M in 1994 and "having a good relationship" with the Texas Farm Bureau.

Her real credentials that led to her receiving a nomination in the incoming Trump administration was serving in his first administration and founding the America First Policy Institute. During Trump's first term, Rollins was director of the US Domestic Policy Council, where she was instrumental in Trump's suppression of protests after the police murder of George Floyd.

The only agricultural policy put forward by the America First Policy Institute thus far has been to fearmonger about Chinese ownership of agricultural land. The institute drafted model legislation passed by 12 states to ban Chinese ownership of agricultural land. A report by Cornell University debunked the alleged threat.

Meanwhile, Louisiana reported its first presumptive positive case of H5N1. The patient required hospitalization, and confirmatory testing by the CDC is ongoing. In California, another dairy farmworker was infected, and a child who drank raw milk there is officially listed as a "suspected case."

The danger of the virus spreading through raw milk is amplified by Trump's nomination of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. (RFK, Jr.) whose charlatanism extends to advocating vigorously for legalizing the sale and distribution of raw milk. As secretary of Health and Human Services, he could potentially lift a rule banning its sale across state lines.

Scientifically, raw milk has none of the additional benefits over pasteurized milk that its proponents falsely claim. And it has extraordinary dangers for transmitting a wide variety of pathogens, including H5N1. One outbreak of Salmonella alone, caused by raw milk consumption, sickened at least 171 people from September 2023 to March 2024.

Michael Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, said: "This outbreak could be many times larger than the 171 cases reported."

Notably, the company that sold the contaminated raw milk, Raw Farm, was visited by RFK Jr. prior to his withdrawal as a candidate for the presidency. The CEO of Raw Farm, Mark McAfee, has applied for an advisory role with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), something he was reportedly encouraged to do by the RFK Jr. team working on the transition to the new Trump administration.

If he were brought on as an adviser to the FDA, as is characteristic to so many individuals associated with Trump, it would amount to putting the fox in charge of the henhouse. The FDA has an enforcement action active against Raw Farm in the Eastern District of California.

The ongoing, rapid spread of H5N1 throughout the United States, infecting people, cattle, poultry, house cats, marine mammals, and of course wild birds, is an object lesson for workers on the inability of capitalism to contain deadly pathogens and prevent future pandemics. The ruling class, as it claws back workers' gains on wages, pensions, health benefits, and working hours and conditions, is also clawing back the gains in life expectancy seen in the 20th century that resulted from public health innovations and practice.

To preserve and extend life, workers must organize their own

independent program, free from the influence of the two capitalist parties and their subservient trade union bureaucracies. Only then can they overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism, a social system that prioritizes human life, including the prevention and elimination of future pandemics.



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