

# FAO calls for increased vigilance as avian influenza virus H5N1 advances

As the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus, H5N1, spreads across countries in West and Central Africa, with Cameroon becoming the latest African country to detect the disease, the region is on high alert. H5N1 kills poultry at a high rate and can infect and cause death in humans.



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The latest H5N1 outbreaks were recently confirmed on chicken farms in Cameroon putting the poultry production in the country and its neighbours at high risk. This is the first time the disease has been found in Central Africa since 2006. This brings the number of countries that have battled bird flu in West and Central Africa to six, also including Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria.

Nigeria continues to be most affected, with the total number of outbreaks exceeding 750 with nearly 3.5 million birds dead or culled. The newly recorded outbreaks in Cameroon raise significant concerns that the disease may be advancing southward, triggering national and global emergency responses to contain the disease, and health screenings of poultry workers.

FAO, meanwhile, is alerting neighbouring governments to be vigilant and continue their heightened surveillance and prevention efforts, including common messaging to the public and data sharing between the public health and agriculture sectors. "We're looking at a quickly spreading disease that has devastating effects on livelihoods in communities," said Abebe Haile Gabriel, FAO deputy regional representative for Africa. "H5N1 causes major losses of nutritious food and threatens farmers' livelihoods, particularly in resource-poor environments where governments have difficulty providing financial compensation for losses," he said, adding that "trade restrictions often pose an additional hardship on already struggling economies."

The H5N1 strain of avian influenza has caused the death of tens of millions of poultry and losses of tens of billions of dollars worldwide since the virus first spread internationally in 2013 - in Cameroon alone, losses have added up to an estimated \$20 million, according to local media reports.

## FAO response

FAO is working closely with the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) and the [World Organisation for Animal Health](#) (OIE) to

offer member-countries assistance, such as risk assessments, contingency planning, technical advice and laboratory material. They also help with investigating potential avian influenza cases in animals and humans and locating the source of infection.

In Cameroon, FAO is boosting the local veterinary services' capacity to respond rapidly to new outbreaks and is working with the government to finalise an action plan similar to effective plans applied in other countries stricken by the virus. Response interventions include culling infected and exposed poultry, disinfecting premises and markets and safely disposing of dead birds.

Veterinary officers, meanwhile, are encouraged to use basic techniques like "trace-forward" - which looks at where infected animals have been sold or moved to - and "trace backward" - examining where infected animals were purchased or where they came from - to find sources with the ultimate goal of halting continuous virus introduction or further spread.

A major concern is that the disease may become endemic in the entire region, particularly in Nigeria where avian influenza has become so entrenched in poultry production and marketing systems that it will be difficult to eliminate. For that reason, producers and traders need to be made aware of the clinical signs of the disease symptoms, how and to whom to report it, and implement good hygiene practices to halt its spread.

FAO will continue assisting governments in mobilising funds to combat H5N1, in addition to the agency's own efforts to help boost local veterinary systems, strengthen laboratories, and deploying FAO specialists to affected and at-risk countries.

The first assessment mission and distribution of equipment in Cameroon was made possible by funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). FAO is seeking \$20 million to support its regional response to H5N1.

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