

Memorandum

To: All Department of the Interior Employees

From: Tom Weimer, Assistant Secretary,
Policy, Management and Budget

Subject: ABC Movie on Bird Flu Pandemic

As many of you are aware, ABC will broadcast a made-for-TV movie tomorrow, May 9 (8-10 pm EST) called "Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America." This fictionalized account portrays an outbreak of the H5N1 avian flu virus from its origins in a Hong Kong market through its mutation into a pandemic virus that becomes transmittable from human to human and spreads rapidly around the world.

This broadcast may lead to an increase in public and news media calls concerning the Federal Government's avian influenza efforts. As public concern about avian influenza increases, it is important to separate fact from fiction.

To help clarify any misconceptions about avian influenza that may arise from this movie, DOI and its federal and state partners have prepared public service informational materials, some of which will be distributed to media prior to and following May 9, while others will be posted to federal websites.

Also, ABC News has decided to do a three-part news series for its affiliated stations in conjunction with the movie. The three public service programs will be for all affiliated stations across the Nation to run on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday's late afternoon/evening news programs (5 to 11 p.m.). The Monday program will discuss how high pathogenicity avian influenza travels; Tuesday will be "The Movie: Fact or Fiction"; and Wednesday will be about avian influenza vaccines.

There are several key facts that Interior employees and the public should keep in mind about this movie. It is not a documentary. It is a work of fiction designed to entertain and not a factual accounting of a real world event.

There is no influenza pandemic in the world at this time. The most recent Asian strain of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus is almost

exclusively a disease of birds and even in birds, has not yet appeared in North or South America.

The risk of high path H5N1 transmission from wild birds to humans is extremely low. That said, the potential for migratory birds to carry this virus to North America does exist and we have a responsibility to plan and prepare accordingly. The Department and its bureaus (particularly USGS, FWS and NPS) have been closely involved in the government-wide effort to plan for and respond to a pandemic, including the Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza, which was released last week.

Should this virus appear in the United States, it does not mean the start of a pandemic. Moreover, the next influenza pandemic could be less severe than what the movie depicts or that occurred in 1918. For example, the influenza pandemics of 1957/58 and 1968/69 caused so much less illness and death than did the 1918/19 pandemic that many Americans at that time did not distinguish them from seasonal influenza and were unaware that a pandemic was underway.

While the movie does serve to raise awareness about avian and pandemic flu, we hope it should inspire preparation – not panic. It is important for all Americans to be informed about this potential public health threat and we advise looking carefully at the recommended steps individual Americans can take to protect themselves and their families and their communities in the event of a pandemic.

You can practice good public health measures like frequent hand washing and staying home when sick. You can keep a supply of food and medicines on hand in case you have to stay home, a wise precaution for any type of emergency. There is good information available on www.pandemicflu.gov and on the DOI web site at <http://www.doi.gov/issues/avianflu.html>

DOI Migratory Bird Monitoring and Testing

There is no reason to think that the highly pathogenic strain of H5N1 avian influenza that is spreading in parts of Asia, Europe and Africa poses an unreasonable health risk to either wildlife or people in the United States. Still, the potential does exist for wild migratory birds to carry this virus to North America, and DOI has a responsibility to prepare.

This strain of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) is a bird disease, as are many strains of bird flu currently found in this country. Although this strain of the virus has rarely infected humans, most cases have resulted from extensive contact with infected poultry or surfaces contaminated with secretions and/or excretions from infected poultry.

The risk of HPAI transmission from wild birds to humans is extremely low. However, common-sense hygiene practices are always appropriate. The U.S. Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center has posted guidelines for the safe handling of wild birds at:

http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/publications/wildlife_health_bulletins/WHB_0503.jsp.

In March, former Interior Secretary Norton announced the completion of an Interagency Strategic Plan for early detection of HPAI through surveillance of wild birds. The plan establishes national priorities and strategies for monitoring wild birds for avian influenzas.

The Department's priority in 2006 is to establish an effective wild migratory bird surveillance system in Alaska, elsewhere in the Pacific Flyway and the Pacific Islands. Collectively, Interior agencies, particularly the U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and State cooperators, plan to collect 75,000 to 100,000 samples from wild birds in 2006.

In the initial phases of the plan, the interagency group, in conjunction with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, will take up to 15,000 samples from 29 bird species in more than 50 locations throughout Alaska. This state is a flyway mixing bowl, where birds from Asia might transmit a virus to wild birds from the Lower 48. This testing program will provide early warning for the potential arrival of this virus strain in North America. The collective goal of Federal and state agencies will be to minimize impacts and mortality in wild birds and poultry after its arrival, and minimize the potential for human exposures.

The four national flyway councils are stepping down the Federal interagency strategic plan for application within each flyway. We expect most States to further step down those flyway plans to identify specifically where and when the sampling should occur and what entities will do the work.

If high pathogenicity H5N1 is detected in the United States in wild birds, DOI, in conjunction with the USDA and State departments of natural resources and agriculture, will act to minimize the risk of transmission to poultry. The focus will be on keeping people and domestic animals away from infected wild bird populations by increasing biosecurity measures at farms and educating people.

Employee Safety and Pandemic Preparedness

In addition, the DOI is carrying out programs to ensure public and employee health on DOI managed-land and integrated, consistent public information on avian influenza; and the Department and its bureaus (particularly USGS, FWS, and NPS) have been closely involved in the government-wide effort to plan for, and response to, a pandemic, including the National Strategy that was released last week.

The Department's initiatives to protect its employees and visitors include health-related informational campaigns, employee training and public outreach programs. Among these information products are posters and printed pamphlets, website guides, Public Service Announcements and Wildlife Health Bulletin to hunters, including Native Alaskan villagers and Alaskan subsistence hunters, who will be among the first to come in contact with migratory birds arriving from Asia this spring.

Interior employees engaged in the migratory bird testing program are receiving health and safety instruction in both on-site training programs and web-based instructional courses. Those employees who work at sites that provide habitat for migratory birds also are receiving training and outreach education. Native Alaskans are receiving information in native languages.

On March 31, 2006, DOI provided a draft Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan to the Homeland Security Council. If a pandemic flu should occur, the objectives of the DOI plan, which will be final by June 1, 2006, are to 1) implement strategy to limit spread of the disease among employees and visitors; 2) plan for uninterrupted delivery of mission essential functions; 3) mitigate impact on operations and resume normal operations as soon as practical.

The plan provides guidance on Departmental and bureau responsibilities for protection of employee health, continuity of operations in a pandemic disease environment, support of the interagency response under the National Response Plan, and communications requirements. Information is provided from human resources, information management and safety perspectives to enable bureaus to optimize performance of their workforces while protective health of employees and visitors during a pandemic event.

Bureaus are now working on their individual draft implementation plans. Strategies for protecting employees in the workplace, expanding telework opportunities, or providing other personnel flexibilities will vary based on the mission requirements of DOI work units. The National Business Center will prepare an implementation plan for Main Interior and South Interior Buildings.

All of the DOI and other federal preparedness programs and initiatives are part of the President's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza, a comprehensive approach to addressing the threat of pandemic influenza. The strategy, which President Bush announced on Nov. 1, 2005, outlines how the U.S. government is preparing for, and how it will detect and respond to a potential pandemic. It provides clear and concise principles and objectives for pandemic preparedness.

On May 3, 2006, the Homeland Security Council released the Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza, which integrates planning across all levels of government to ensure that planning and response actions are complimentary, compatible and coordinated. The Plan directs federal agencies to carry out 324 critical actions within prescribed amounts of time.

The Plan ensures that the federal government, along with our state and local partners, continues to take appropriate steps in preparation for highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1) and a possible human influenza pandemic in the country.

Additional details about wild bird monitoring and management, safety guidelines for hunters and wildlife watchers and other information for DOI employees, State wildlife agencies and the public are online at these sites:

Federal Government-wide Avian Influenza Information:
www.pandemicflu.gov

Department of the Interior-wide Avian Influenza Information:
www.doi.gov/issues/avianflu.html

U.S. Geological Survey National Wildlife Health Center Avian Influenza:
http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease_information/avian_influenza/index.jsp

Homeland Security Council's National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza:
www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/nspi.pdf

Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza:
www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/pandemicflu/

Interagency Strategic Plan:
http://www.doi.gov/issues/birdflu_strategicplan.pdf

U.S. Department of Agriculture: <http://www.usda.gov/birdflu>