

Combating Illegal Bird Importation

Every year, there are many attempts made to smuggle birds into the United States. Most of them are brought in during the hatching season for wild birds, which starts in January and continues through mid-May. Most smuggled birds originate from Central America, South America, and Mexico, but smuggled birds have also been identified coming in from countries such as China and Thailand. Though many of these birds may not exhibit symptoms, they sometimes carry diseases, including the contagious virus that causes exotic Newcastle disease (END). U.S. poultry and caged birds are extremely vulnerable to this virus. Just one infected bird can rapidly spread the disease to others, and from location to location.

Bringing smuggled birds into the United States also increases the chance of introducing high-pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) into the country, including H5N1 strains of the disease. Worldwide, there are many strains of avian influenza virus that can cause varying amounts of clinical illness in poultry. HPAI viruses can infect chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quail, ducks, geese, and guinea fowl, as well as a wide variety of other birds.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) works to keep diseases such as HPAI and END from becoming established in the U.S. poultry population. One way APHIS does this is by maintaining trade restrictions on the importation of poultry and poultry products that can carry the virus from countries with END and HPAI-affected domestic poultry.

Agency Coordination

While USDA establishes the regulations for these restrictions, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) unit is responsible for enforcing these laws at ports-of-entry across the country. Following USDA regulations, CBP agricultural specialists prohibit the entry of live poultry, commercial birds, pet birds, and/or "hatching eggs" from countries affected by H5N1 strains of HPAI. APHIS continually updates its import procedures to reflect the most current disease-status information.

In addition to import restrictions, APHIS quarantines and tests live birds imported into the United States to ensure they are not carrying any foreign animal diseases such as END and HPAI. Except for birds from Canada, which are not quarantined, all pet

birds and live poultry from approved countries must be quarantined for at least 30 days at a USDA-approved facility.

Smuggling Interdiction and Trade Compliance

To combat illegal importation of poultry meat and other avian products, APHIS maintains a special Smuggling Interdiction and Trade Compliance (SITC) program. The officers involved in this program work cooperatively with CBP agricultural specialists at U.S. ports-of-entry. These officers also educate DHS and other State and Federal partners about prohibited products and restricted commodities.

In addition, SITC officers work within the United States to find illegal contraband at retail markets, specialty shops, restaurants, agricultural fairs, and other venues. When smuggled products are intercepted in the marketplace, SITC officers conduct trace work to determine the pathways through which prohibited products were smuggled into U.S. commerce and ensure that additional prohibited products are not allowed entry into the country. These officers also conduct traces to determine the distribution of prohibited items. Any contraband discovered is disposed of by appropriate methods under the supervision of regulatory officers. If a potential violation is identified during the trace work, APHIS' Investigative and Enforcement Services (IES) is notified and will pursue an investigation.

APHIS analyzes data gathered from past agricultural import violators to target future shipments. Working in collaboration with DHS and other Federal and State partners, APHIS:

- Conducts background investigations into importers based on cargo manifests and other shipping documents;
- Assists DHS in verifying cargo of containers at ports-of-entry;
- Verifies commodities at warehouses and cargo destinations;
- Performs market surveys and special operations at ports-of-entry.
- Educates market owners and the general public about smuggled agricultural items and the threat they pose to the health and viability of U.S. agriculture.
- Shares information with CBP as well as other Federal and State agencies to help concentrate their antismuggling efforts.

When smuggled animals are intercepted at the ports-of-entry, CBP contacts the port veterinarian in APHIS' Veterinary Services (VS), who will either

dispose of, reexport, or quarantine the prohibited animal. VS port veterinarians are stationed at most commercial ports that allow the importation of live animals. When CBP inspectors intercept smuggled animal products or byproducts, CBP contacts the APHIS Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) veterinarian to consult on the destruction of prohibited animal products and byproducts. PPQ veterinarians are located regionally throughout the United States and its territories.

CBP also notifies APHIS of any potential violations, and IES then initiates an investigation. Violators are subject to civil and/or criminal penalties. IES works closely on many of these investigations with the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and Customs and Border Protection, and USDA's Office of Inspector General.

The United States is the world's largest producer and exporter of poultry meat and the second-largest egg producer. In cooperation, APHIS and CBP's efforts are critical for ensuring that any bird or products derived from birds smuggled into the United States are seized to eliminate the risk of introducing a foreign animal disease. It is also important for bird owners to observe and report signs of illness in their birds. Information about reporting sick birds is available through APHIS' Biosecurity for the Birds public awareness campaign. Log onto <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/hpai.html> to learn more. For additional information about USDA's avian influenza efforts, go to <http://www.usda.gov/birdflu>.

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