

January 30, 2003

Contact: Sylvia Small, Vice President Communications, ssmall@poultryegg.org
Emily Snyder, Communications Specialist, esnyder@poultryegg.org

For Immediate Release

END Is an Issue of Critical Importance to U.S. Poultry Industry

Exotic Newcastle disease (END) has become an issue of critical importance for the poultry industry since its detection late last year in a backyard flock in California, speakers said at the 55th Annual International Poultry Exposition, held recently in Atlanta.

As of Jan. 24, END had been confirmed in six of California's commercial layer flocks. Three of the confirmations have been traced to fighting birds in backyard flocks and two to movement of people and trucks. Nearly 2.0 million hens have been ordered to be destroyed.

With nearly half of California's commercial laying operations located in the quarantined portion of southern California, the concern is that the situation is going to get worse before it gets better.

California state veterinarian Dr. Richard Breitmeyer told those at the International Poultry Exposition educational program that the next few weeks will be very telling and should provide a good indication of just how extensive the outbreak will likely be. The incubation period for END in chickens is two to six days.

END is one of the most infectious poultry diseases in the world and is so virulent that many birds die from the disease without displaying any clinical signs, with a death rate that is often 100 percent. A major outbreak in Southern California in 1971 led to destruction of 12 million birds, an eradication response that cost \$56 million.

Breitmeyer said the extent of the situation in California has caught everyone a bit by surprise. Prior to the outbreak, he said, no one had a good handle on the size of the state's backyard flock sector. We knew it was there but we didn't know how big it was, he said. At the very least, it is estimated there are 3 million game birds in California belonging to some 50,000-60,000 different owners.

Under California law, ownership of game birds is legal but fighting of the birds is illegal. Even so, Breitmeyer said, bird fighting is an accepted practice among certain cultures. It is such an accepted practice that authorities in California have actually had to break up two bird fights being staged on quarantined sites.

Other complicating factors for authorities and inspectors, said Breitmeyer, have been the number of loose birds in the quarantined areas that must be captured and the language barrier that exists between bird owners and inspectors.

Breitmeyer's advice to operators of commercial poultry complexes is that they assume everyone coming to work each day has been exposed to END. Given the current situation, he said, it would be difficult for employees not to have been exposed to the disease. He recommends that commercial operators require all employees to shower in. "Biosecurity is extremely important," he said.

"Our commercial poultry flocks are at a very high risk right now," said Breitmeyer. He pointed out that it is for that very reason that the industry must act now to improve its biosecurity efforts.

The place to start, Breitmeyer said, is for each commercial poultry producing state to get a handle on its game fowl industry. "Until we started looking, we simply didn't know the scope of this industry," he said. He encouraged other state veterinarians in the audience to lead this charge in their respective states.

In addition, a long-term disease-prevention strategy with Mexico must be developed, said Breitmeyer. "We need to stop sharing this disease," he said.

-more-

Vaccination for END is another area that Breitmeyer said deserves some immediate attention. While the value of the practice has long been debated, he said it is time for some extensive research in this area.

W. Ron DeHaven, deputy administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, suggested that a good place to get a handle on the extent of the backyard flock population in a certain region is to check with the local feed store. Likewise, he said, feed stores play an important role in getting the word out to urban folks on the risks associated with END and the prevention practices that should be followed to reduce those risks.

The U.S. Postal Service and commercial airlines, DeHaven said, also are cooperating and have halted shipments of birds. Previously, the postal service had been a major carrier of birds.

The International Poultry Exposition is sponsored annually by the U.S. Poultry & Egg Association. It is the world's largest display of products, services, and technology for the poultry and egg industry.

###