

Big Bird. Big Problem.

How the Poultry Industry is Turning the Avian Flu Pandemic into a Source of Profit at Taxpayer's Expense While Decimating Our Farm & Food System

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Executive Summary

◆ Largely missing from most media coverage and public policy discussions related to the H5N1 avian influenza virus that emerged in 2022 is what role the mega-confinement, industrialized poultry system of agriculture has played in creating and propagating this pandemic. Are these operations the “victims” of a virus that originated in an environment outside of Big Ag’s control? Or is the Big Bird CAFO system itself the source of the problem? And is society’s strategy of paying big poultry companies to wipe out infected flocks and to continue business as usual yet one more way of subsidizing a system of food production that is inherently unsustainable?

◆ Just as the COVID-19 epidemic upended industrial meat slaughterhouses and placed livestock farmers in significant financial peril, avian flu has highlighted the fragility of an overly concentrated system of food production. However, the poultry industry and the USDA have been quick to claim that CAFO operators are not to blame for the virulence of H5N1. They argue that large-scale, closed off, “biosecure” facilities are still the best way to produce livestock, and that this virulent form of bird flu is the rare result of such security features being breached by outside forces that are beyond their control. It’s been suggested that two of these outside forces are wild waterfowl and farming operations that raise poultry on pasture and in otherwise “backyard” or non-confined situations.

◆ There is increasing evidence that CAFOs are the perfect environment for a virus like avian flu to survive, thrive, and increase in virulence. Meanwhile, the strategies being used by the government thus far — pay producers to kill off entire flocks while subsidizing the construction of even larger CAFOs — are not a long-term solution.

◆ A growing group of scientists are calling for the industrialized livestock infrastructure to be replaced by agroecological systems in which meat comes from networks of small, locally owned farms whose practices are less likely to intensify disease. In order for a diversified, de-centralized livestock production system to become viable, it needs to be backed up by an equally de-centralized processing, marketing, and distribution system for those products.

◆ The farm and food system that has provided such a fertile seedbed for the deadly H5N1 avian influenza virus was not created by accident. Much of the blame can be placed on public policies that prop up and perpetuate an industrialized system that is inherently, and fatally, flawed. The Land Stewardship Project proposes several steps to start us on the road toward a more resilient poultry production system, including:

- ✓ Ending the subsidization of the current CAFO system.
- ✓ Directing public funds to a more regenerative system.
- ✓ Supporting a localized and distributed processing system.
- ✓ Funding land grant research that gets at the cause of the problem and sustainable ways of resolving it.
- ✓ Media coverage that digs deeper into this story rather than repeating the government/industry narrative that the current CAFO system is the only viable way to produce poultry and poultry products.