

California governor declares a state of emergency over bird flu threat

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California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a state of emergency proclamation Wednesday over the spread of the H5N1 bird flu among dairy cows. The action comes on the heels of new cattle infections identified in dairy farms in Southern California.

The emergency declaration noted that “on December 12, 2024, dairy cows at four Southern California dairies tested positive for bird flu, necessitating a shift from regional containment to statewide monitoring and response to active cases.”

Newsom issued the following statement: “This proclamation is a targeted action to ensure government agencies have the resources and flexibility they need to respond quickly to this outbreak. Building on California’s testing and monitoring system—the largest in the nation—we are committed to further protecting public health, supporting our agriculture industry, and ensuring that Californians have access to accurate, up-to-date information. While the risk to the public remains low, we will continue to take all necessary steps to prevent the spread of this virus.”

Since March 2024, the bird flu has affected 16 states and 865 dairy farms. Since the H5N1 virus was first detected in Central California on August 30, 2024, there have been 649 herds impacted in the state, 315 just in the last 30 days, and 120 in just a week, according to the US Department of Agriculture. Until early December, all the infections had been contained across nine counties in central California.

The exact cause of the spread, however, remains unclear, according to the CEO of Western United Dairies, Anja Raudabaugh. Although cattle movements are the usual way for such spread, other factors such as infected people and shared milking equipment may have contributed to the outbreak in Southern California.

Currently, 985 dairies in California are under

surveillance and 614 are under quarantine, according to the state of emergency proclamation. With over 1,100 dairies statewide, most located in the Central Valley, California’s annual milk production amounts to 41 billion gallons of milk, more than 18 percent of the total US production of milk, valued at \$20 billion at the farm, and more than \$160 billion at the supermarket.

Raudabaugh told the local news media, “You do not want this on your herd. It’s that bad ... we have to do something really drastic in order to prevent this. Relying on herd immunity is not a good strategy.”

Although bird flu is not nearly as deadly among cattle as it is among birds and chickens, the estimated fatality rate runs around 2 percent. However, once infected, the cow’s digestion process of ruminating stops, and it stops taking water. The animals also develop fevers, and with high ambient temperatures, they are predisposed to heat stress. Additionally, their milk production begins to decline rapidly early in the course of infection and only returns back to normal over the next several weeks.

Despite claiming he was being “proactive,” Newsom invoked use of the usual soporific catch-phrase, reassuring the public, “While the risk to the public remains low, we will continue to take all necessary steps to prevent the spread of the virus.” Yet, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported that since April 2024, when the first person was detected infected with bird flu, there have been a total of 61 human cases, of which 34 have been in California.

One also must assume the impetus for the state of emergency proclamation was more than the economic challenges facing dairy farmers in California. On the same day Newsom made his declaration, the CDC confirmed the first case of severe H5N1 infection in a

person in Louisiana, who is believed to have contracted the virus from dead birds found in his backyard. The Louisiana Department of Health had made a presumptive identification of H5N1 in a resident from the southwestern part of the state who is currently hospitalized.

The elderly unidentified person, with known health conditions that increase his risk for severe disease, remains in critical condition with significant respiratory symptoms, according to Emma Herrock, spokesperson for the department.

During a news conference on the H5N1 situation in the country, Demetre Daskalakis, director of CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, reported that the genetic sequence in the Louisiana case was different from the clade 2.3.4.4b genotype B3.13 strains affecting the dairy herds. The version that has infected the elderly person was the D1.1 genotype which has been circulating in wild birds. This was also the version that had sickened a British Columbia teenager last month. That person was in the critical care unit for several weeks on a ventilator and has remained in the hospital to date.

Wisconsin also reported its first human case of H5N1 bird flu linked to poultry in Barron County. The person in question was exposed to an infected flock. Raj Rajnarayanan, Assistant Dean of Research and Associate Professor at NYITCOM at Arkansas State University, wrote on his social media that the case in Wisconsin belongs to the D.1 genotype of the bird flu "currently circulating in Washington state, Louisiana and British Columbia, Canada."

Dr. Nahid Bhadelia, director of the Boston University Center on Emerging Infectious diseases, said of these events, "All these infections in so many species around us are paving a bigger and bigger runway for the virus to potentially evolve to infect humans better and transmit between humans. That represents an escalation in the situation, even if risk to general population remains low."

The failure to contain and eradicate the virus from dairy cattle and, more broadly, from agricultural facilities is not from any lack of technical skill or scientific knowledge, but stems from the capitalist nature of the agricultural business.

The Biden administration has protected the profit interests of the dairy industry under its Secretary of

Agriculture Tom Vilsack, a former governor of Iowa and lobbyist for the dairy industry. Last week, the administration said that there were no current plans to authorize producing a stockpiled bird flu vaccine despite these developments.

This means that any action against the spread of bird flu to humans—where the death rate could be as high as 50 percent of those infected, compared to 1 percent for COVID-19—will depend on the decisions of the Trump administration, with its prospective Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a notorious vaccine denier and conspiracy theorist.



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