

IEC's World Poultry Forum – Overview

The IEC, in conjunction with the International Poultry Council, hosted the first World Poultry Forum as part of its Annual Marketing and Production Conference in Guadalajara Mexico at the end of September.

The top avian influenza expert at the United Nations told more than 400 representatives of the egg and poultry industry from around the world that while the H5N1 AI virus will continue to cause problems, the world's industries can lessen its impact on production and consumption. Delivering the keynote address at the first World Poultry Forum in Guadalajara, Mexico, Dr. David Nabarro, UN senior coordinator for human and avian influenzas, challenged the poultry industry worldwide to work together to minimize the impact of H5N1.

Joining Nabarro at the forum were two other recognized experts on avian influenza: Dr. Luis Barcos, regional representative for the Americas, World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), and Dr. David Swayne of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Exotic Animal Disease Unit. Barcos briefed attendees on the role of the OIE in helping control the spread of animal diseases such as AI, while Swayne provided a technical overview of the virus itself, drawing from research that he and his colleagues have conducted.

Nabarro said that meetings such as the World Poultry Forum are one of the most important things that can be done in the worldwide struggle to contain AI. The World Poultry Forum was held during the International Egg Commission's (IEC) annual meeting in conjunction with the first annual conference of the International Poultry Council (IPC).

Nabarro said that poultry is the core survival strategy of millions of people worldwide, that poultry meat and eggs provide a key protein source, and raising poultry is key for many households to emerge from extreme poverty. But, because many of the world's poultry growers are subsistence-level farmers rearing backyard flocks, the danger of further outbreaks of H5N1 AI is still a reality. "Has the virus stopped moving?" Nabarro asked. "No. It's just out of the newspaper. It's still moving around Nigeria, still is in Egypt."

In clearing up a common misconception, Nabarro made the distinction among influenzas. "There's seasonal influenza; there's bird flu, and then there's pandemic influenza, which infects large numbers of people across the world," he said. "To use the term 'pandemic bird flu' is incorrect." The H5N1 virus strain has been affecting birds since 1998, particularly since 2003, he said. Since the beginning of this year, however, the world experienced an explosion of H5N1. "In the first six months of 2006, 42 new countries have reported H5N1, up from just 15 countries last year," he said.

Nabarro stressed that human infection by the H5N1 virus is still "very rare," considering the millions of birds that have been infected. Of the 241 reported human cases, 141 have been fatal, mostly children and young adults. Moreover, he said the number of countries with human cases is also small, with Indonesia

having the largest number. "There are occasional cases of human-to-human transmission, but it's not sustained transmission," he said. He explained for an influenza pandemic to occur, three things are required: "a flu virus for which we have no immunity; a virus that can cause disease in humans, and a virus that can be transmitted to others. We don't have that," he said. Nabarro said that H5N1 could become such a lethal virus, "but it has not undergone the mutation for that to happen."

Even so, the World Bank has estimated that a flu pandemic could cause as much as \$2 trillion in economic damage, Nabarro said. "This is the reason for so much focus on this issue," he said. Nabarro said that although the world's poultry industries must be vigilant about protecting their interests through good bio-security, animal health and veterinary practices, small farmers must be protected. If not, small holders will seek political solutions, which could force politicians to work against commercial producers.

He also praised the work of industry groups such as IPC for developing ways to promote consumption. Efforts such as making cooking thermometers available and "slogans like 'Just cook it!' are absolutely the right thing to do," he said. "The reality is for producers to learn to live with H5N1," Nabarro said. "If we work together, we can get it under control. If we can get commercial poultry bio-secure, tested and certified, and link that to consumer education measures, we can break the cycle."

Barcos, meanwhile, described the mission and objectives of the OIE, which has been in existence since the 1920s to monitor animal diseases worldwide. Among the main objectives of the OIE, he said, are to maintain transparency in the reporting of animal health information, to develop international standards on sound science, and to maintain solidarity among member nations.

Barcos, the OIE's regional representative, based in Argentina, said that the OIE has developed relationships with international entities such as the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, the World Trade Organization, and the Codex Alimentarius Commission. OIE also cooperates with a number of scientific veterinary professional groups around the world.

Widely regarded as one of the foremost experts on the avian influenza virus, Swayne is the first to demonstrate that low-pathogenic AI viruses are not present in the meat of affected chickens and other poultry. Swayne also demonstrated that the highly pathogenic virus, especially the Asian form of H5N1, can be transmitted into the meat of infected birds, but that proper cooking temperatures are sufficient to inactivate the virus. "Cooking poultry meat to 70 degrees Celsius for one second will destroy the virus," he said. Swayne noted that there have been 24 epizootics (defined as a poultry disease caused by a distinct lineage of highly pathogenic AI virus) of highly pathogenic AI since 1951 around the world, but said the Asian H5N1 strain that has caused problems in many countries since 1996 "is the worst epizootic in 50 years."