

I recently had a virtual meeting with Victoria's Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr Graeme Cooke. In the event of an outbreak within the areas where fanciers' lofts are located options range from complete shutdown of the sport with all birds being confined to their lofts (which apparently is what the poultry industry wants) through to the rather lenient restrictions based on what is allowed in the UK . These were forwarded to me by Dr Angela Scott (principal Poultry vet in AgVic) and are below

"If you're in a bird flu disease control zone, you:

- can fly racing pigeons, doves or other Columbiformes from their home loft for up to one hour, once a day as a single loft
- must try to prevent your birds having any contact with wild birds
- must not leave lofts open for birds to come and go
- must not fly birds together from more than one loft (bird gatherings are not allowed in disease control zones)"

Currently in Victoria it is likely that pigeons near an outbreak would need to be confined to their lofts and lines of flight would be restricted over quarantine areas . If the sport was seen to be compliant with these measures then racing could continue. However, in Victoria, how the sport responds to an outbreak is very likely to affect how the outbreak is managed by AgVic. .

In South Australia, PIRSA contacted me 2 weeks ago and asked if I would be prepared to join a veterinary advisory committee to the South Australian Chief veterinary officer, Dr Elise Spark. I accepted. I think it important that we have representation and input. I have found my interactions with AgVic in Victoria very positive and I am hoping it will be the same in South Australia.

Avian Influenza – a summary

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As most fanciers would be aware Avian Influenza (AI) of the H5N1 strain was diagnosed in WA and SA during June. It was also diagnosed in NSW in July. Avian influenza has been diagnosed several times over the last few years in Australia. This is the first time however that the H5 strain has reached Australia. Despite all that has been written by me and others in the Journal there still seems to be some confusion in some sectors of the pigeon community about AI. So, here is a quick summary of AI and how it affects pigeons generally and the sport in Australia specifically.

AI and Australia

AI is typically carried by sea birds and periodically gains entry to Australia as these birds migrate here. Pigeons do become infected with Avian influenza but usually only show mild or no symptoms. With time they clear the virus. The persistent carrier state does not occur . When infected, pigeons do not usually build up sufficient levels of the virus in their system to pass the virus onto further birds. For this reason, they are described as a “dead- end” host. The significance of pigeons in the control of AI, however, is that while infected they can contaminate an environment with the virus particularly through their droppings. It is therefore important that they are not given the opportunity to do this. The virus can survive longer under cold and wet conditions (weeks to months) than under warm, dry conditions (hours to days). Because pigeons are not regarded as a high-risk species or a major source of infection, if a pigeon loft is diagnosed with the disease, then control measures are often as simple as confining the birds to the loft until the disease has passed (usually several weeks) and disinfection .

If, however the disease goes undetected in a loft and that fancier continues to race his birds then the virus has the potential to spread, not only to other lofts, through race baskets, but also to wild bird populations through contact with returning race birds. This would negatively impact the sport and possibly interrupt a race season. The aim therefore is for the disease to be detected in a loft before this can occur.

Because we do not have state (or federal) membership lists it is difficult, or in fact impossible, to quickly and widely spread accurate information. It therefore becomes imperative that administrators such as club and federation secretaries and presidents not only familiarize themselves with what needs to be done in the face of an AI outbreak but also educate their members.

So, what should the sport's administrators be doing ? They should :-

1/ encourage all of their club and federation members to get a Property Identification Code (PIC). If there is an outbreak of ill health in a loft and AI is a possibility then if the fancier has a PIC the government will cover the cost of testing. If an Emergency Animal Disease (EAD), such as AI, is suspected there is no charge to the fancier even if he does not have a PIC. Having a PIC however streamlines testing and enables rapid identification of an infected property.

2/ tell fanciers to monitor their birds for symptoms consistent with AI – general malaise or signs of a respiratory infection

3/ tell fanciers that if symptoms are observed then they should organize to have their birds tested. To have their birds tested all fanciers need to do is contact their normal attending veterinarian or their District Veterinary Officer (DVO). Alternatively, fanciers can ring the Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) hotline on 1800 675. Testing involves taking a swab from the bird's throat . The birds are not harmed . Results are available overnight and cost the fancier nothing.

4/ tell fanciers not to mix their pigeons with those of other fanciers until the test results are returned – usually 24 hours

It sounds simple but these measures are all that is required to minimize the impact of AI on the sport. In the extremely improbable event that AI is diagnosed in a loft then the likely requirement is that the birds will need to be confined to the loft until the outbreak has passed. This is likely to be several weeks. Ignorant, selfish, ill informed, non-compliant fanciers who decide to do nothing and continue to toss and race their birds risk spreading the virus to many

lofts . If this happens then many fanciers would be impacted and racing would likely be suspended.

It is the fancier who has unwell birds in his loft, particularly if several have vague respiratory symptoms and does nothing, or perhaps just culls affected birds, but does not do anything to identify the cause and continues to race that will be the fancier who spreads the disease and risks shutting the sport down.

Having a significant number of fanciers requesting testing would suggest to AgVic that the sport is aware of the problem, is encouraging fanciers to test suspect birds and is therefore more likely to detect the disease if present in lofts. With this evidence of self- regulation, decisions affecting the sport would be less likely to be made by others .

AI preparedness essentially comes down to fancier education. Fanciers need to be made aware of the symptoms their birds may show if infected with AI, of the benefits of getting a PIC (essentially rapid identification of infected properties), of the SDI program (where the government will cover diagnostic costs), and of accurate information from AgVic and pigeon organisations (through the development of state and federal electronic membership lists). Non-compliant or ill-informed fanciers will lead to delayed identification and impaired control of outbreaks, leading to a more negative impact on our sport. We need to avoid the confused response that occurred when PPMV and Rota appeared. AI has the potential to have a much greater impact on our sport because, where PPMV and Rota just affect pigeons, AI affects chickens. Because of the financial importance of the chicken industry, control measures will be much more aggressive. AgVic is keen to work with our sport to quickly and effectively control outbreaks so that our sport and the chicken industry are minimally impacted. We need however to do our part.