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Gov't Worried About Underground Routes That Could Spread Bird Flu

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By Investigative Reporter Leisa Zigman

I-Team

KSDK-Fears of a global killer flu, whether likely or not, have forced local, state, and federal officials to create pandemic emergency plans.

The I-Team recently obtained internal government documents that detail what officials aren't telling us. The documents detail the underground routes the virus is predicted to take to spread into North America.

One route poses a chilling threat to Missouri and Illinois. It involves animal swap meets where birds and other animals are bought and sold like items at a flea market.

Sunday, we took hidden cameras into what Illinois agriculture officials call an illegal animal swap meet. Experts tell the I-Team the majority of people who buy and sell at swap meets are legitimate.

But they also say swap meets provide the perfect venue for smugglers.

Parrots like majestic macaws typically cost more than \$1,000. Legal birds come with papers proving where they were born. Some even have microchips implanted.

Birds are the third most popular pets, right behind dogs and cats.

St. Louis veterinarian Dr. Dave Kersting treats about 10,000 birds at his clinic. He receives calls from people daily worried about H5N1, the avian flu.

Dr. Kersting said, "The risk is more through smuggled birds and birds coming into the country from affected parts of the world."

Dr. Kersting says birds sold at swap meets are one of his biggest concerns.

Sunday, our hidden camera photographed a swap meet at the Monroe County Fairgrounds in Waterloo, Illinois.

We saw all types of birds crammed into cages, sold from the backs of trucks, and loaded into trailers.

A woman we'll call "Sherry" used to be connected to the smuggling trade. She is now an undercover federal informant.

Sherry met us at the swap meet and says some of the chickens end up in restaurants.

Sherry went on to say, "These chicken yard sales are in every state. It's just a matter of time before something comes in."

In Missouri, anyone can operate a swap meet.

State agriculture officials say you don't even need a permit. That is not the case in Illinois.

According to officials with the Illinois Department of Agriculture, organizers of the Waterloo swap meet did not have a permit. Under the law, the spokesperson said, organizers could be fined.

Sherry believes officials are not paying close enough attention to the animal smuggling trade and the potential harm it could do to the poultry industry.

At the Waterloo swap meet we did not see any health inspectors, any agriculture officials, or anyone else who could determine where these birds came from. We did not see anyone who could ascertain whether they might be sick or whether they were legal.

Last year, the federal government banned the sale of exotic birds from any country where officials detected avian influenza.

Mike Cooke is the assistant director of the World Bird Sanctuary in Valley Park. He is convinced exotic bird smuggling is a staggering concern when it comes to the spread of avian flu.

Cooke said, "It's almost inevitable it will happen."

Last week, the I-Team obtained an internal U.S Department of Interior briefing. The heading reads "HPAI: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza --Not IF, But When."

According to the report, avian flu will likely spread into the states either through international commerce like poultry, contaminated materials, smuggling, or the pet and wildlife trade. The report also listed migratory birds and the potential for human-to-human transmission.

Mike Williams is the director for communicable disease control and emergency preparedness at the St. Louis County Health Department. At a recent pandemic planning seminar Williams said,

" It will enter one of two ways, either through migratory birds, or smuggled birds. It's possible the smuggled bird might be the earlier event."

Avian Flu is also a concern for Mary Bradford, who owns the Tropics Exotic Bird Refuge outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. She wants federal authorities to do more to stop the black-market trade.

Bradford said, "We now have more smuggled birds coming into the United States than we do legal birds. I call them the bird Mafia."

United States Fish and Wildlife agents are trying to stop smugglers at airports and seaports. But, they're outnumbered. There are only 120 agents trying to inspect thousands of imports a day.

Bradford said the inability to handle bird smugglers "Could be a catastrophe in the making."

Most agree that, at this point, avian flu poses the greatest risk to the poultry industry. Unless H5N1 mutates, the current virus does not easily spread to people.

The Midwest Bird and Animal Breeders Association organized the Waterloo swap meet. The group's president told me he didn't know he needed a permit. In the future he said he would get one from state authorities. He also said he would clamp down on vendors who do not have required documents.

Experts say you can't get avian flu by eating cooked chicken or turkey.

One official with the Illinois Department of Agriculture pointed out two years ago the message regarding mad cow disease was that it was safe to eat meat in the United States. She said the new message regarding Avian Flu is that it's safe to eat chicken and turkey in the United States.

The following policy statement is reprinted from The American Federation of Aviculture with the organization's permission

The American Federation of Aviculture, Inc. (AFA), has been closely monitoring and is extremely concerned about the recent reports of cases of Bird Flu in Asia and Europe. Currently, the recognized sources of bird flu are poultry and waterfowl. However, AFA believes that it is important at this time to be responsible, proactive and constructive in protecting our birds and the people of our country. As a result of its concern, AFA is issuing the following policy statement to the Pet Bird and Avicultural Communities.

1. Retail, wholesale and avicultural establishments should promptly implement and strictly observe stringent bio-security and disease prevention measures.

Birds should be purchased only from known sources observing secure practices.

Purchase of birds at bird fairs, from strangers or non-established vendors such as

traveling sellers should be avoided. Where feasible, avicultural breeding establishments should be "closed" to new purchases until the crisis abates.

Retail establishments should observe reasonable isolation quarantine measures with respect to newly acquired birds and should require employees to wash hands, disinfect shoes and wear protective coats and head coverings when handling birds or moving from one bird section to another.

Wholesale and avicultural establishments should require employees and caretakers to observe strict bio-security practices requiring the disinfecting of shoes between aviaries, washing of hands, food and dishes and wearing of protective clothing. New birds should be quarantined away from established birds and where possible, handled by different personnel.

Where practical, customers wishing to be in close proximity to or handle birds should be required to participate in sanitary precautions such as walking over a disinfectant pad and using a hand sanitizer.

Observe birds closely for signs of disease and contact knowledgeable and qualified avian veterinarians at the first signs of disease.

Observe staff for signs of flu-like disease and keep sick personnel away from birds.

Unexplained (i.e., other than trauma or clear non-illness related) deaths of birds should be reported to proper authorities for testing and evaluation, and aviaries should be closed until causes of non-explained deaths are resolved.

For those with outdoor aviaries or holding facilities, every effort should be made to keep birds from coming into contact with or being contaminated by wild birds. Bring birds indoors or cover cages with protective material where possible.

Other helpful links:

- Click here for our ksdk.com section on the flu.
- Mary & John Bradford
The Tropics Exotic Bird Refuge
www.parrotrefuge.com
e-mail: tropics@juno.com
- World Bird Sanctuary
- Dr. David Kersting-veterinarian (314) 469-6661
- American Federation of Aviculture
- Avian Influenza CDC information
- Avian Influenza WHO information