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SYSTEM FOR REPORTING SICK, DEAD BIRDS ESTABLISHED IN COLORADO

DENVER - A new, comprehensive system has been established in Colorado for reporting sick, dying or dead birds that might be carriers either of avian flu or West Nile virus.

Although no avian flu has been identified in any birds in the United States or in Colorado, the system has been established as a precautionary measure in case such birds do reach this continent through world migratory paths.

Persons who find dead birds or would like to report sick or dying birds in their bird flocks in the state should call the Colorado Health Emergency Line for the Public (CoHELP) at 1-877-462-2911. The emergency line staff is available to respond to hotline calls from 7 a.m.-11 p.m. on Mondays through Fridays and from 9:30 a.m.-8 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

Dr. Keith Roehr, the acting state veterinarian from the Colorado Department of Agriculture and a member of the Colorado Avian Surveillance Program, said, “We do not intend to frighten residents of this state. But, we do want to work with them to receive and appropriately relay and coordinate any information they have about unhealthy or dead birds and to answer their questions and concerns.”

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Roehr continued, "Highly pathogenic avian influenza has not been identified in any bird found in the United States. However, we believe it is important that Colorado be ready to immediately identify any bird, dead or alive, that is suspected of being a carrier of avian flu. Also, we are moving into West Nile virus season, and it is important that we be able to track the location and the numbers of dead birds found to have that disease."

The hotline is operated by the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Control Center and is under contract to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Emergency Preparedness and Response Program to take calls from the public and to answer questions of concern during health emergencies. The hotline handled an onslaught of calls during 2003 when Colorado was particularly hard hit by West Nile virus and by human flu.

The decision to use the hotline staff to take calls on reports of dead birds or bird-related concerns was made by the Colorado Avian Disease Surveillance Program, which also developed a protocol for receiving the calls; providing needed information on bird health and dead birds to callers; and for forwarding information to the appropriate Colorado agency.

Participants in the program, which has developed the bird surveillance plan, are representatives of the Colorado Department of Agriculture; the Colorado State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory; the Colorado Division of Wildlife; and the Department of Public Health and Environment.

The protocols include:

- If the bird is a wild raptor, game bird, shorebird or a type of waterfowl, hotline staff will collect information on the number of dead or affected birds and will direct callers to the closest Division of Wildlife Regional Office or Service Center for follow-up.

- If the bird is a songbird, hotline staff will collect information about the number of affected birds. If there are one or two dead songbirds, callers will be advised of proper disposal procedures. If there are three or more dead birds, callers will be directed to the closest Division of Wildlife Regional Office or Service Center for follow-up.

- If the bird is a crow, raven, magpie or jay from the corvid family, the usual carriers of West Nile virus, callers will be directed during the West Nile virus season from June through September to their local or regional public health agency. Using West Nile virus surveillance guidelines implemented in 2003, the local or regional public health agencies will make further decisions about West Nile virus testing and specimen collection depending on local outbreaks and surveillance needs. Outside of the West Nile virus season, this species of birds will be handled similar to songbirds.

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- Callers reporting sick or dead domestic (owned) birds, including chickens, turkeys, game birds and waterfowl, will be directed to the Colorado State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory.

Roehr said that duties for tracking bird health and disease issues have been divided according to the expertise of the agency involved in the program.

Dr. Laurie Baeten, wildlife veterinarian for the Division of Wildlife, said the Division of Wildlife is the response agency for all wild bird health and disease issues in the states. Decisions regarding wild bird specimen collection, testing and response will be made by the division.

The Department of Agriculture is the response agency for all owned and domestic bird health issues in the state. The Department of Agriculture and the Colorado State Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory also will work with flock owners to collect samples for testing and educate and engage commercial and non-commercial flock owners on issues relating to avian disease and biosecurity practices for the protection of all birds and people who live and work with birds. Calls on these issues will be handled by veterinarians from the two agencies.

The Department of Public Health and Environment's Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology Division, working in cooperation with local health departments and county public health nursing services across Colorado, will handle issues relating to birds suspected of being carriers of West Nile virus.

The Colorado State University Diagnostic Laboratory is the United States Department of Agriculture approved testing laboratory for the state and region.

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