Newcastle Disease a Potential Problem for Oregon's Poultry

By Jim Hermes, OSU Poultry Specialist

Exotic Newcastle Disease (END) is well known by poultry producers. Its mere mention sends shivers up the spine of even the most stalwart poultrymen. While it is well known for its devastating effect on poultry by producers, this disease is virtually unknown to most, even many involved in other agricultural enterprises.

Newcastle disease is caused by a virus that is usually confined to the tropical areas of the globe. It can be found naturally in numerous species of birds found in these regions. When contained there is little threat to commercial poultry in the US and particularly in Oregon. However, occasionally it finds its way from the tropics, crossing international borders, usually by smugglers of pet or domestic birds, and into the highly susceptible birds in commercial poultry flocks in the US.

Currently, there is a severe outbreak of this disease in Southern California. First identified in October of last year, it remained confined to small game fowl and backyard chicken flocks. However, in spite of intense bio-security measures including restricting bird traffic, depopulating infected flocks, door to door searches for infected birds, and isolating commercial poultry flocks, the bad news came in late December - END was found in a commercial flock of layers, and has since been found in four more. In addition, it has been found in Nevada, near Las Vegas. Since then, USDA has placed a federal quarantine on the area, stopping the movement of all birds or bird products from the area.

The CA Dept. of Food and Agriculture has depopulated hundreds of small flocks and most of the infected commercial flocks totaling nearly two million birds so far. During the last major outbreak in California in 1971, about 12 million birds were depopulated before the END crisis ended. With an estimated cost of $56 million.

What about Oregon producers? Should they be concerned? Even though our commercial poultry flocks are hundreds of miles from the quarantined areas of California, Oregon’s commercial poultry industry, a nearly $100 million per year agricultural industry in Oregon, has already heightened their bio-security programs to reduce the possibility of infection in their flocks. However, the industry needs the help of the small flock producer as well. Many times, the small home flock of chickens will become infected with disease organisms, particularly END before the commercial flocks.

To reduce the chance of flocks becoming infected producers must isolate themselves from sources of infection, other flocks of birds. Bird or human traffic from flock to flock is the most common method of spreading this disease.

Small flock producers must report their sick birds to authorities. Proper diagnosis of sick or dead birds is very important. The primary symptom of END in chickens is respiratory in nature, labored breathing,
coughing, sneezing, drainage from nose or mouth. Other symptoms may accompany the respiratory stress such as lethargy, head bobbing or neck twisting, malformed eggs, in addition to others. The worst part is that nearly 100% of birds exposed will become sick and more than 90% will die of the disease.

The good news is that END, while devastation to poultry and other birds, is not infectious to people or other mammalian livestock or pets. The poultry and egg supply remains safe to consume as always. If you have birds or know of birds, chickens or other species, that are showing the signs of END described above, it is imperative that a proper diagnosis is obtained to rule out this disease. Sick or fresh dead birds can be submitted to the OSU Veterinary Diagnostic Lab in Corvallis 541-737-3261. Or contact, Jim Hermes, OSU Extension Poultry Specialist at 541-737-2254. For further information concerning END please go to the Oregon Department of Agriculture website at www.oda.state.or.us/