
(Sidebar)

AN EPIDEMIC OF FEAR: THE FALLOUT FROM AVIAN FLU

BY CHARLES CAPALDI

“The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” Chicken Little

Small poultry producers, and in particular, proponents of open-air, pastured poultry are concerned, and with good reason. Consumers have embraced the improved flavor (and nutrition – although the FDA might disagree about this) found in free range, pastured or organic poultry and eggs. The commercial poultry industry hasn’t ignored the fact that consumers can actually “taste” the difference between a commercial product and a free-range one.

Will poultry industry lobbyists take this opportunity to modify regulations that squeeze small farmers out of the market? On a recent trip to the farmer’s market in Manhattan, I was struck by the black market trade in raw milk – normally a federally regulated commodity. In Wisconsin, it is illegal to sell the raw milk from your barn unless the containers are carefully labeled “For Animal Consumption Only” – and even then, it is risky. In Vermont, dairy farmers are closely regulated to make sure their raw milk sales do not exceed the state mandated limit. Could it eventually become as illegal to sell eggs or chicken to your neighbor, as it is to sell him your milk?

Four states (Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Texas) have already had outbreaks of the low pathogenic strain of avian flu (H7N2) causing Mexico and Europe to ban all chicken and egg imports from the U.S. The low pathogenic outbreaks of H7N2 were contained by culling the infected birds and vaccinating flocks in a ring around the infected farm. Unfortunately, similar strategies for the high path A(H5N1) strain were insufficient to prevent the spread of the virus across most of Asia, largely because it has become endemic to the wild fowl population there. I find it disconcerting that some national newspapers are reporting that avian flu can be contained on the basis of our experience with H7N2. There isn’t a shred of scientific evidence to support that.

Some experts would have us believe that no changes are necessary. When, and if the disease reaches our shores, we can implement policies that will hopefully contain its spread. Others suggest a more radical approach. Legislators in Virginia are already drafting legislation which would eventually force pastured poultry producers to move their flocks into confinement as a preventative measure, and possibly prohibit the sale of their products.

I’m neither a scientist, nor a legislator – just a small farmer who puts 50 broilers in the freezer every year and collects fresh eggs every day from my small flock of layers. Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy to have the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization watching my back. I take some solace in the thought that, unlike global warming, at least the current administration takes the risk of an epidemic seriously. But, I worry that the Chicken Little mentality that seems to prevail will allow the government to curtail our right to produce the very food we eat. Farmers already contend with the barriers of patented seed, patented life forms, and contraband farm products. The refrain “*The sky is falling! The sky is falling!*” seems to be one more way to push us out of food production.

Our politicians would like us to think they are responding promptly to the threat of avian flu. They want to divert \$5.95 billion toward protecting the nation against an epidemic over the next two years. But Houston, we have a problem.

The World Health Organization says that “*on present trends, neither of these interventions [vaccines and anti-viral drugs] will be available in adequate quantities or equitably distributed at the start of a pandemic and for many months thereafter.*” During the 1957 and 1968 global influenza outbreaks (where more than 200 million people died worldwide), an effective vaccine wasn’t available in most countries until after the virus had already run its course. Likewise, no one has ever established the effectiveness of Oseltamivir, the only antiviral drug available on the market (Tamiflu™) to which the H5N1 virus isn’t resistant. Tamiflu™ is known to be effective against general *human* influenza viruses if administered within 24 hours of exposure. I can’t say that I’ve lost any sleep trying to figure out when I’ll take my dose. But I admit, I have thought about it. Do I take it when some guy in the feed store sneezes? How about when the lady at the post office discreetly coughs into her hand? Or, when the minister’s family comes down with the sniffles at church?

For the record, Tamiflu™ doesn’t actually kill the virus. Instead it makes it harder for the virus to infect other cells. According to the Physician’s Desk Reference, you can expect on average, a one day reduction in flu symptoms, IF you receive your dose within 24 hours of exposure. I reviewed the clinical descriptions of five early H5N1 cases in humans (all in Thailand). Three of the five were given Oseltamivir/Tamiflu™ after the 24 hour window. All five cases required intubation and oxygen support for an average of seven days after admission to the hospital. All of them died.

In the end, the Administration’s response to the threat of the H5N1 virus is reminiscent of the way it approached the war in Iraq. Rally the homeland around a common threat, give the illusion of doing the right thing, and pursue the political agenda that was already in the works. We have to wonder whether that agenda is just another way to “sanitize” and “institutionalize” the U.S. food supply? President Bush’s 2007 budget proposes that funding for the National Cancer Institute (\$4.75 billion) and the National Heart, Blood and Lungs Institute (\$2.9 billion) be reduced by \$111 million in order to divert those funds to an avian flu eradication effort. Meanwhile, 70% of deaths in the United States are caused by heart disease, cancer and diabetes – not by Avian Flu.

This is the administration that used weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as a justification for the war, and then failed to produce any. It’s the same administration that touts coal as “the clean fuel of the future” and that rewrote the organic statutes so that Del Monte and Dole could sell organic produce.

Isn’t it ironic that all three cases of mad cow disease in the U.S. came from Canadian farms, as if to imply that mad cow is a *Canadian* problem, not an American one. I wonder where the department of Homeland Security was when those cows were crossing the border. I wonder where they’ll be when Avian Flu lands on our shores.