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# Avian flu conditions still evolving (Editorial)

(June 14, 2016) The Mid-Atlantic, mercifully, managed to dodge an outbreak of avian flu this year and in somewhat of a celebration of that, poultry shows and exhibitions are being welcomed back to 2016 state and local fairs.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that recent research strongly indicates that it's not only wildfowl that can carry the virus onto your farm and into your chicken houses.

It's mammals — on-the-ground mammals such as skunks and rabbits — that can carry the virus and infect your farm.

Composting bins and sheds may be the problem.

"When wildlife and poultry interact and both can carry and spread a potentially damaging agricultural pathogen, it's cause for concern," said research wildlife biologist Dr. Jeff Root, one of several researchers from the National Wildlife Research Center.

The risks from mammals frequenting areas in and around poultry farms should be taken into consideration when crafting biosecurity plans, according to an NWRC study published in late 2015.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the number of animal visitors is to use freezer collection units for routine mortality, instead of composting.

Composting sheds attract scavengers including buzzards, foxes, raccoons, birds and feral cats.

Those same animals also visit local waterways where they can come into contact with migratory waterfowl.

In 2004, retired University of Delaware poultry specialist Bud Malone observed evidence of all of those scavengers visiting compost bins on farms that were infected with low-pathogenic avian influenza.

With that in mind, the decision of agriculture and environmental health officials across the Mid-Atlantic to allow poultry exhibitions and shows at this year's fairs was not without this stern precaution:

If high-path avian flu is diagnosed anywhere in the Mid-Atlantic region or Atlantic flyway, all 2016 poultry fairs and shows will be cancelled.

There were also these other cautions and regulations.

All poultry, including domestic waterfowl, can be shown and all wildlife and petting zoo displays will be allowed.

Eggs can be shown if cleaned and sanitized.

Obviously, in-state and out-of-state testing requirements for avian influenza and Pullorum Typhoid will remain. Private sales also remain prohibited.

The message is this. With winter over and warmer weather here to stay for a while, officials believe the threat of AI has been reduced. High-path avian influenza is primarily a wintertime disease, they note, allowing now for a modest relaxation of precautionary rules and regulations.

But note the use of the word "modest" particularly now that it has been established that rabbits and skunks and other mammals, which routinely visit farms and barnyards can carry the virus, the flag is still up.

Let's not drop our guard.



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