

Case 8 | Public Health Measures on Farms

Case developed in Collaboration with the [Bridge Research Consortium](#).

Avian influenza (aka bird flu) has been detected in livestock in Canada. If not properly controlled, this outbreak could evolve into a pandemic with potentially global consequences. In response, public health professionals in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Public Health Agency of Canada have introduced (or considered introducing) preventative measures to minimize health risks. These measures could include quarantining affected farms, 'culling' livestock (millions of chickens, ducks, and turkeys have thus far been killed in Canada), and also requiring the vaccination of farm workers.

Culling livestock can have profound financial implications for farms since this removes sources of income. This practice can also cause disruptions in food supply chains, potentially raising food costs. In addition to bearing these disruptions and costs, farmers may also be asked (or required) to implement safety measures in order to reduce risks of this virus spreading into the human population, e.g., by testing their animals or products, testing themselves, wearing personal protective equipment like masks. So far, significant burdens of pandemic prevention have been shouldered by Canada's farmers and the animals they care for.

This has led to some opposition from farmers, the farming industry, and jurisdictions where farming represents a large share of the economy. Ideally, those whose interests are harmed by adhering to public health guidelines would be adequately compensated. In cases where compensation is incomplete or impossible, though, are farmers ethically required to make sacrifices for the sake of public health? If a farmer is unwilling to comply with public health recommendations, under what circumstances, would it be fair to introduce penalties or sanctions?

Are there lessons from the COVID pandemic for guiding our sense of best practices when regulating for general safety? In what ways, if any, do required sacrifices for public health in a full-blown emergency situation, like a pandemic, differ from requirements made preventatively? How much should some sectors of our society or economy be required to sacrifice for the greater good of reducing potentially catastrophic risks to public health?

Discussion Questions

1. How should the burdens of reducing risks to public health be distributed and compensated?
2. Given our experiences with the rollout and uptake of COVID-19 vaccines, how should we approach the vaccination of farm workers at a time when the risk that bird flu poses to human health is still relatively low?
3. Some farm workers are undocumented migrants. How should plans for official testing and vaccinating be implemented when workers may worry about exposing their legal status?

Further Explorations

"Avian Influenza AH5N1: Canada's Response." Public Health Agency of Canada.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/avian-influenza-h5n1/canada-response.html>

"Avian Influenza – Information and Resources." Chicken Farmers of Canada. <https://www.chickenfarmers.ca/avian-influenza/>

"'They need to back off': Farm states push back on Biden's bird flu response." Meredith Lee Hill, David Lim and Marcia Brown. *Politico*. May 6, 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/06/bird-flu-dairy-farms-cdc-00156119>