High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza and Wildlife

Communications guide for managers of wildlife populations

June 2024

Purpose

This is a general guide to assist managers of wild animal populations with public communication in Australia on high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) in wildlife. It may also be useful for managers of captive wild animal populations, such as zoos, fauna parks and rehabilitation sites, as well as government agencies.

This guide is limited to communications while HPAI has not been detected in Australia.

Context

Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI (H5Nx clade 2.3.4.4b) has caused unprecedented outbreaks of HPAI in wild birds, mammals (both wild and domestic) and poultry in all geographical regions except Oceania (which includes Australia and New Zealand). The emergence of the 2.3.4.4b strain overseas means an increased risk to Australia, due to the increase in the likelihood of entry into Australia via wild bird movements and anticipated increased consequences if it were to enter.

In recognition of this increased risk to Australia, managers of wildlife populations are encouraged to:

(i) raise awareness about HPAI amongst their stakeholders to enhance early detection of HPAI in wildlife; and

(ii) enhance biosecurity to mitigate the risk of HPAI introduction, establishment and spread in wild animal populations.

The need for managers of wildlife populations to undertake HPAI awareness and outreach amongst their stakeholders is reflected in Wildlife Health Australia's HPAI Risk Mitigation Toolbox for Wildlife Managers.

Following a detection of HPAI in Australia, including in wildlife, communication and engagement will be coordinated nationally by the National Biosecurity Communication and Engagement Network (NBCEN), and is not the direct responsibility of managers of wildlife populations. For that reason, this guide will not cover communications that apply following the detection of HPAI in wildlife in Australia. It is recommended that managers of wildlife populations engage with the biosecurity agency in their jurisdiction to discuss HPAI prevention, preparedness, and communications materials.

When to use this guide?

This guide may assist wildlife managers in preparing communications materials (e.g. signage, fliers, media releases, social media posts or website content) targeted to stakeholders that may interact with wild animal populations or their environments, including:

- members of the public
- bird banders, wildlife rangers and researchers
- veterinarians and animal health professionals.

Information to include in communications materials

Essential information to include…

- **Signs of illness** in wildlife that stakeholders should look out for.
- **What to do** if stakeholders observe unusual illness or deaths in wildlife, including **how to report** signs of disease consistent with HPAI.
- Any **biosecurity measures** or personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements for the site and wild animal populations.

Recommended information to include…

- Information about **human health risks** from HPAI.
- Information on the **avian influenza situation in wildlife** in Australia and overseas, and risk of HPAI to wildlife in Australia. The information should emphasise the current increased risk level to Australia and therefore the need for heightened vigilance.
- That HPAI is a **nationally notifiable disease**, and AUSVETPLAN sets out the nationally agreed response approach to AI outbreaks in Australia. This includes agreed policy in Australia with respect to LPAI or HPAI detection in wild birds.

Communication Style

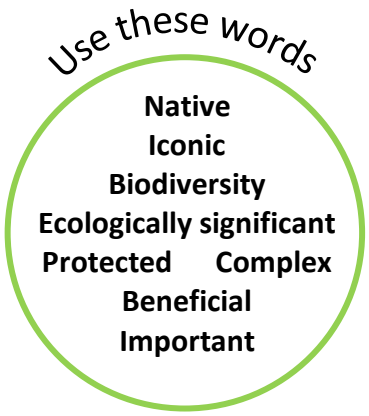
This checklist can be used to encourage balanced communication.

Don't…

- Use sensationalist language including "clickbait" style headlines.
- Use exaggerated claims or descriptions.
- Use fear inducing photos of wildlife.
- Use fear inducing or emotional language particularly when discussing HPAI risks.
- Use "us versus them" language.

Do…

- Ensure use of scientifically accurate, referenced information.
- Seek technical review (see below).
- Use matter-of-fact language without hyperbole.
- Provide context for quotes, claims or research findings.
- Emphasise the ecological and economic benefit and importance of wildlife.
- Promote co-existence with wildlife.
- Address and dispel misconceptions and myths.
- Ensure any photos of people handling wilds animals show correct use of PPE.
- Provide advice and language tailored to different stakeholder groups.



Communication Style Examples

✗	*"Members of the public should not go near or touch wildlife as they might catch bird flu, a deadly disease."*	Lacks information so can easily be misinterpreted.
✓	*"Although AI viruses do not normally infect humans, some subtypes have been associated with disease in humans ranging from mild illness to severe disease and death (see Australian Department of Health and Aged Care). Always view wildlife at a distance and avoid contact with sick or dead wildlife."*	Provides context; includes practical advice and links to reliable sources of further information.

✗	*"Headline: Ducks in the city - a cause for concern."*	'Clickbait' style headline using negative, fear-inducing language.
✓	*"Headline: Waterbirds and migratory birds in our park: here's what to remember."*	Informative and appealing headline. Can lead into discussion about the species of birds typically found at the site.

✗	*"Avian influenza is a deadly disease of birds that is at Australia's doorstep. We must all play our part to keep it out of Australia."*	Fear-inducing and emotional language. Lacks information about the real risk to Australia.
✓	*"Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry and wild birds in all geographical regions except Oceania (which includes Australia and New Zealand). The emergence of this strain overseas means an increased risk to Australia due to an increase in the likelihood of entry into Australia via wild bird movements and anticipated increased consequences if it were to enter. The WHA webpage on HPAI has information on how stakeholders can reduce the risk of HPAI to Australia."*	Informative and factual.

✗	*"If you see sick or dead wildlife and suspect avian influenza, call your local council."*	Incorrect reporting channel.
✓	*"If you see sick or dead wildlife and suspect avian influenza, you must report it to the 24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888."*	Correct reporting channel.

Review of communications materials

It is recommended that managers of wild animal populations provide the biosecurity agency in the relevant jurisdiction with the opportunity to review communications materials relating to HPAI prior to publication.

Other contacts who may be of assistance in reviewing communications before release:

- Wildlife Health Australia Wildlife Coordinators or Environment Representatives in the relevant jurisdictional agency (link to contact details)
- Wildlife Health Australia staff (link to contact details)
- University researchers and ecologists.

Useful Talking Points

About avian influenza

- Avian influenza (also known as bird flu) is a viral disease caused by an influenza A virus.
- As with other viruses, there are numerous different strains. Strains of avian influenza are categorised as either low pathogenicity (LPAI) or high pathogenicity (HPAI) depending on the potential severity of disease caused in poultry.
- LPAI naturally occurs in wild birds in Australia, notably waterfowl (ducks, geese and swans) and shorebirds, and typically do not cause severe disease.
- Some specific LPAI subtypes (subtypes H5 and H7) can evolve to high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) after transmission to and circulation in poultry.
- HPAI typically causes severe disease in poultry and some strains may also impact wildlife (birds and mammals) and domesticated mammals.
- Although avian influenza viruses do not normally infect humans, some subtypes have been associated with disease in humans ranging from mild illness to severe disease and death.

Avian influenza - reporting requirements

- Avian influenza (both LPAI and HPAI) in birds is a notifiable disease in Australia, meaning that if you suspect or can confirm that an animal is showing symptoms of avian influenza, you must report it to the 24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888.

Avian influenza - current overseas situation

- Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI (caused by a strain known as 2.3.4.4b) has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry, wild birds and mammals (wild and domesticated) in all geographical regions except Oceania (which includes Australia and New Zealand).
- The emergence of this strain is associated with a significant increase in the frequency and geographic range of HPAI outbreaks in both wild birds and poultry overseas.
- Mortalities have been observed in a wide range of bird and mammal species, seen as individual animal deaths and mass mortalities.

Avian influenza in Australia

- HPAI strain 2.3.4.4b has not been detected in Australia in any species.
- The emergence of this strain overseas means an increased risk to Australia due to an increase in the likelihood of entry into Australia via wild bird movements and increased consequences if it were to enter.

- LPAI viruses have been detected in wild birds in Australia and are part of the natural virus community of Australian wild birds. Targeted surveillance has not detected HPAI virus in Australian wild birds.
- LPAI viruses can be introduced to poultry from local wild birds. The virus can then subsequently mutate from LPAI virus to HPAI virus after circulation within poultry, which is a well-documented occurrence.
- There have been 11 outbreaks due to HPAI H7 viruses in Australian poultry since 1976, with the most recent outbreaks in 2024 in Victoria, NSW and ACT. All previous outbreaks were successfully eradicated and response to the three 2024 outbreaks is ongoing at time of publication. These outbreaks were most likely caused by introduction of local wild bird LPAI H7 viruses and subsequent mutation from LPAI virus to HPAI virus after circulation in poultry: a well-documented occurrence. Note: HPAI H7 viruses are a different strain of HPAI from the HPAI H5 strain 2.3.4.4b that has been impacting poultry, wild birds and mammals overseas.

What can stakeholders do to reduce the risk of HPAI

There is no way to prevent HPAI entering Australia through movements of wild birds into Australia. However, work is underway to increase the chances of detecting any outbreaks early and preparing to respond if outbreaks occur. Stakeholders should:

- Become familiar with the clinical signs associated with avian influenza in wild birds.
- Report unusual signs of disease or mass deaths in wildlife to:
    - The 24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888
    - The biosecurity agency in the jurisdiction in which the event is occurring
    - Your local State/Territory WHA Coordinator
- For those interacting directly with wildlife, such as researchers, you must operate with an increased awareness of the potential risk of disease in wild birds. Always maintain good hygiene and biosecurity practices before, during and after working with wildlife. Where possible, before undertaking activities, observe for any unusual signs of sickness or deaths in wildlife.
- Do not handle or remove animals suspected to have HPAI unless instructed to do so by government authorities.
- Contact with land or waterways in which sick or dead birds or other animals have been observed should be avoided.
- If you develop flu-like symptoms after handling wildlife, contact your health care provider.

Response to an HPAI outbreak in Australia

- The AUSVETPLAN Response Strategy for Avian Influenza is part of our national response arrangements. This plan sets out the nationally agreed approach to avian influenza outbreaks in Australia and can be found at animalhealthaustralia.com.au.
- The Australian Government publishes information about all current response activities on outbreak.gov.au.

Useful Resources

Information and resources on HPAI and wildlife are available on the WHA website HPAI incident page. Topics include:

- general HPAI advice and information from WHA (e.g. a Fact Sheet on AIV and Australian wild birds, HPAI advice targeted for particular stakeholder groups, technical advice, videos and a communications guide)
- WHA HPAI and wildlife in Australia - risk mitigation toolboxes
- national and international HPAI guidelines from government agencies
- other relevant information (e.g. human health, communications materials).

Example HPAI communication materials from Australia and overseas:

- Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy Avian influenza awareness: Keep a TopWatch! (video)
- UK Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs Avian influenza posters for land managers
- Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs summary
- The Raptor Centre (University of Minnesota) notice to falconers
- WHO HPAI prevention in humans communications materials for social media
- CDC avian influenza communications materials

Wildlife Health AUSTRALIA

Find out more at **wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au**

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