Background information

Avian influenza is a strain of influenza that affects birds and on occasion humans. The virus is extremely transmissible among birds and has a near 100% mortality rate. Cases seen in humans are rare, but its 53% mortality rate means it cannot be ignored. Human-to-human transmission is exceptionally rare, with only two cases ever recorded. Surveillance, vaccines and culling are three of the main methods used to manage avian influenza.

Arguments in favour

Prevention of food shortages and inflation:
Due to avian flu's transmissibility, the disease carried by one flock on a commercial farm can be transmitted to another flock easily. As a result, farmers are forced to cull millions of birds to limit the spread. The deaths of these birds result in food shortages and skyrocketing prices, as can be seen in the United States now, with egg prices increasing by 70 per cent in the twelve months to January 2023 after fifty-eight million birds were killed nationwide.

Prevention of loss of human lives:
The World Health Organisation has warned of potential virus mutations in the future which could make the virus more transmissible between humans. A study by infectious disease expert Michael T. Osterholm from the University of Minnesota in 2005, when the global population was just 6.5 billion, estimated that as many as 260 million people globally could die from an avian influenza pandemic. COVID-19, which has a mortality rate of just under 2% and is also caused by a virus, has killed 6.8 million people, even with the use of lockdowns, mask wearing, improved hygiene practices and vaccines.

Prevention of economic losses:
Avian influenza has been and continues to be a major threat to the global economy. A 2006 Australian National University study states that the global economy could shrink by up to 12.5 per cent, with a cost as high as $6 trillion. The Committee for Economic Development said in a 2006 study that the threat posed to the global economy by a human avian influenza pandemic was just as large as terrorism and the housing bubble that contributed to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The United States' ongoing avian influenza crisis has cost the government over $660 million and cost farmers at least $1 billion. Australia's $3.1 billion poultry industry could similarly face a large drop in value. Similar pandemics such as COVID-19 have caused unemployment to rise, GDP growth to fall and workforce participation to drop.

Arguments against

Cost of safety measures:
To prevent diseases and pests from entering the country, the Australian Government spent $414.5 million on biosecurity in the 2021-22 Budget, nearly half of the entire budget for the department responsible. In addition, if a human avian influenza pandemic occurred, lockdowns, quarantine and vaccines would undoubtedly be part of the government response. Using estimates from COVID-19, this would require billions of dollars of investment into vaccines, economic stimulus, medical costs, unemployment services and more, in addition to millions for poultry farmers. Some politicians have called such levels of

spending irresponsible, considering the current budget deficit and the minimal threat the virus poses to human health. They suggest that the government should let the virus “run its course”.

Vaccination hurting exports:
In March 2023, the U.S. government started considering the use of mass vaccination to prevent the spread of avian influenza. In response, various trade associations raised questions about its effectiveness and potential side effects. Vaccination of chickens means that exporters are unable to ensure that they are free from the disease and as a result, importing countries would likely place import restrictions on vaccinated poultry, while simultaneously raising fears about food safety. This same risk exists with the Australian poultry industry, whose exports are worth $78.9 million.

Data and statistics

Figure 1: The change in price for eggs in the United States.
This shows that since the current avian influenza outbreak started in February 2022, the price of eggs has increased by 60%, a clear sign of the threat it poses to food security.

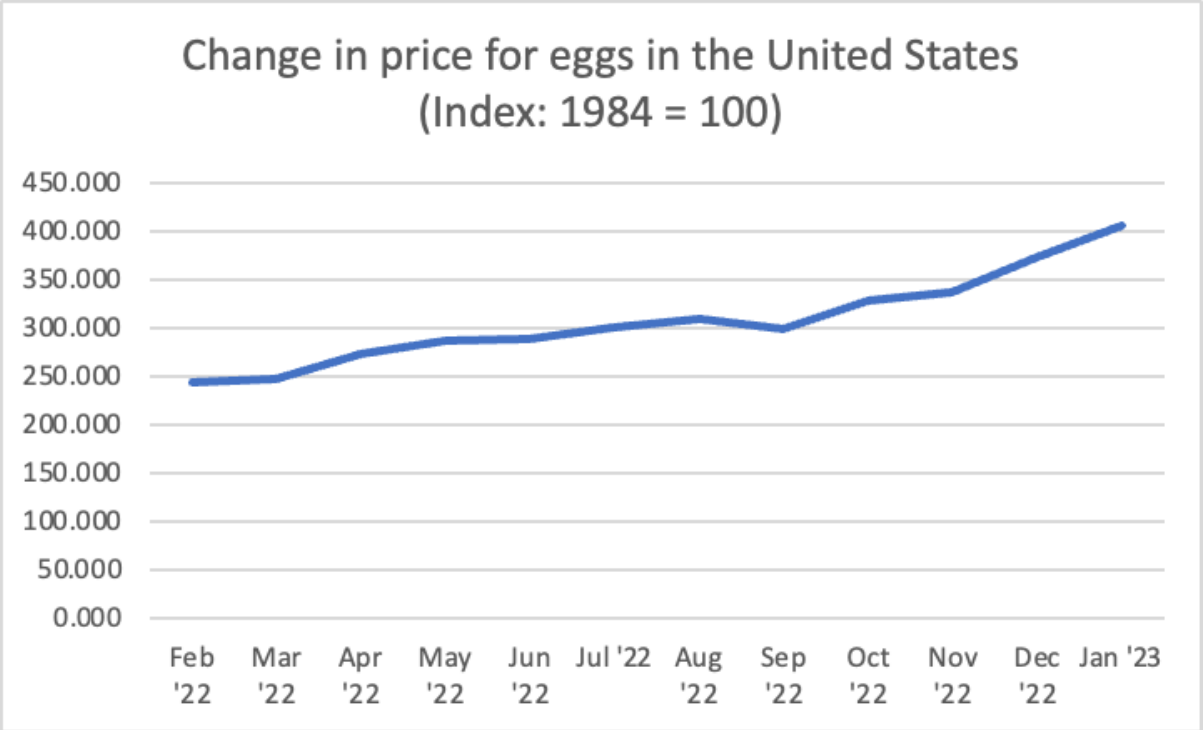
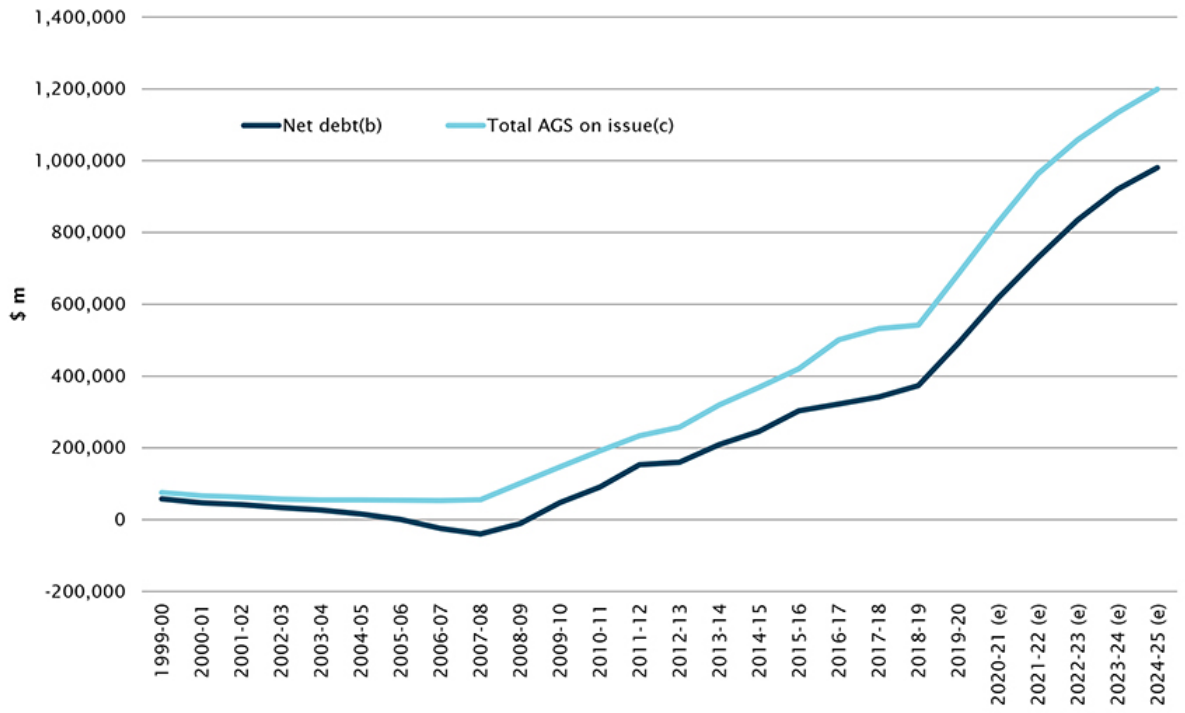


Figure 2: The Australian Government’s net debt from 1999 to 2025.
This shows that the national debt has been growing for years and that it grew at a far higher rate because of pandemic-related expenses, a trend that could be repeated with a human avian influenza pandemic.



Assessment

Avian influenza can kill millions of birds in a matter of months and take the lives of humans. However, responding to this disease will come at a significant cost to both farmers and governments, which will end up costing the greater population billions with food prices rising by as much as 60% in under twelve months and government debt rising by over 50% in just one year, according to the data cited. If no action is taken, a significant hit to the global economy and the loss of potentially hundreds of millions of lives would occur. Ultimately, hundreds of millions dead would end up hurting society far more than billions in government expenditure. As a result, it is imperative that the Australian Government take action to stop avian influenza from reaching its shores immediately.

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Data and statistics

Figure 1:

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