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Under Trump, we could be flying blind when it comes to bird flu, other infectious diseases

An animal caretaker collects a blood sample from a dairy calf vaccinated against bird flu.

An animal caretaker collects a blood sample from a dairy calf vaccinated against bird flu at the National Animal Disease Center research facility in Ames, Iowa, on July 31. (Associated Press)

By **Susanne Rust**

Staff Writer

Jan. 23, 2025 10:20 AM PT



The United States is ground zero for the H5N1 bird flu.

Since March 2024, when the virus was first reported in a Texas dairy herd, the virus has [killed one person](#), sickened scores more, contaminated the nation's food supply, [felled dozens of house pets](#), [infected more than 900 dairy herds across 16 states](#), and caused the deaths of millions of wild animals and commercially raised chickens, ducks and turkeys.

So how President Trump and his administration will deal with this widespread, potentially deadly virus, which scientists say is just a mutation or two away from becoming a full-blown human pandemic, is a question many health officials and infectious disease experts are now asking.

And so far — say the few who will go on the record about their concerns — things are not looking promising.

On Monday, Trump issued an executive order that will remove the U.S. from the World

Health Organization — a 76-year old international agency created, in part, to share data and information about global pandemics.

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He has also shuttered the Biden-era White House Office of Pandemic Preparedness, which was directed by Congress to streamline and coordinate the nation’s response to burgeoning pandemics, such as avian flu. Since the office’s formation in 2023, it has initiated [multiagency coordinated efforts to “test” the nation’s](#) preparedness for novel disease outbreaks, and has provided advice and coordination regarding vaccine development and availability among various health agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration. A visit to the office’s website Wednesday morning showed a “404 Page Not Found” error message.

And on Tuesday evening, news broke that the Trump administration delivered instructions to a number of agencies within the department of Health and Human Services to put a “pause” on all health communications. The department did not respond to questions about the issue.

However, a note from a Human Services spokesman to a Times reporter on a different topic noted that the agency “issued a pause on mass communications and public appearances that are not directly related to emergencies or critical to preserving health.”

The spokesman said the pause was temporary and set up to allow the new administration’s appointees “to set up a process for review and prioritization.”



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Experts say while we’re still in just the first week of the new administration, and things could change, these developments don’t bode well for a transparent and timely response to the growing avian flu crisis.

“More cases of H5N1 are occurring in the United States than in any other country,” said Jennifer Nuzzo, director of the Pandemic Center at Brown University in Providence, R.I. “Pausing our health communications at a time when states are scrambling to contain this virus is dangerously misguided. This will make America less healthy and will worsen the virus’s economic tolls.”

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Experts also say the new administration’s moves could lead to economic and social isolation for many Americans. Other nations may begin to question the health and safety of exported agricultural products, such as dairy, livestock, poultry and meat, as well the health of Americans who want to travel internationally.

“I can foresee countries slapping travel and trade restrictions on the U.S. It’ll affect millions of Americans,” said Lawrence Gostin, a legal scholar at Georgetown University.

Although the WHO does not typically support travel restrictions or trade bans, independent nations can call for such measures. In January 2020, Trump temporarily suspended entry to all non-U.S. citizens coming in from China.

Other nations, said Gostin, could take similar measures if they feel the U.S. is not being transparent or openly communicating information about the H5N1 outbreak. And without a seat at the WHO’s negotiating table, where new pandemic guidelines are currently being drawn, the U.S. may find itself on the outside looking in.

“With our withdrawal, we’d be ceding influence leadership” to China and other U.S. adversaries, said Gostin — the exact opposite of what we should be doing during such a precarious moment for a potentially emerging pandemic. “When the next [WHO] director general is elected, it’ll be China that will be pulling the strings — not the United States,” he said. “Our adversaries will be setting the global rules that we’re going to have to live by.”



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Trump’s decision to remove the U.S. from the WHO rests on two of his convictions: First, that the organization mishandled the COVID-19 pandemic and second, that it charges the U.S. too much money — “far out of proportion with other countries’ assessed payments,” Trump said [in his executive order](#).

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Between 2015 and 2024, the WHO charged the U.S. between \$109 million and \$122 million per year. That accounts for 22% of all member contributions, making the U.S. the largest contributor to the organization.

But it’s not just the isolationist moves and the potential loss of diplomatic strength and influence that worries experts and health officials.

Moves to eradicate offices designed to streamline the nation’s response to bird flu, and directives to “pause” communications about it, suggest either ignorance or a willful blindness to the way H5N1 — and all zoonotic diseases — move through the environment and potentially harm people, said Matthew Hayek, assistant professor of environmental studies at New York University.

The Trump administration “has a real opportunity to come in and and think about this virus and change the way we manage these kinds issues,” he said — noting the Biden administration’s bungled and flat-footed response, which allowed the virus to spread virtually unchecked across the nation’s dairy herds for months. Instead, “from the looks of it, that’s not going to happen. It seems that these first worrying steps with respect to muzzling public health agencies is moving in the opposite direction. And doubling down on the Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil strategy of the Biden administration” is just going to make it worse.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture intends to continue updating its H5N1 website as samples are tested and confirmed, according to Lyndsay Cole, an agency spokesperson. On Thursday,

two new dairy herds in which there were positive tests for bird flu were added to the agency's ["Situational Update"](#) website for H5N1.

John Korslund, a retired USDA scientist, said he wasn't too worried, yet. He said it usually takes a few days or weeks when a new administration comes online for things to settle.

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However, "in the case of H5N1, the new administration has indicated less support for formal pandemic preparedness activities," he said, as evidenced by Trump's withdrawal from the WHO and the shuttering of the White House pandemic office. The moves, he added, "may indicate less Trump administration support for extended federal surveillance and response efforts for H5N1 infections in humans and animals."

He said the virus will likely have to pose a more imminent threat before this new administration decides to provide "significant federal activities or dollars."

Nuzzo, the Brown University researcher, agreed.

"The Trump administration will have no choice about acting on H5N1 — the virus is continuing to sicken people and livestock and is driving up our grocery bills," she said. "The question is not whether the Trump administration will act to combat H5N1, but when and how many lives and livelihoods will be harmed before they act."

Times staff writer Emily Alpert Reyes contributed to this report.

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